Environmental sanitation

Water and sanitation has always been an important part of WHO activities. A continuity that is admirable in itself, as many other health aspects came and went. Naturally, the perception of what is clean water and good sanitation evolved over the years. At the conception of the WHO water and waste disposal (i.e. Sanitation) were a part of what was called Environmental Sanitation, a term that has occasionally resurfaced in water and sanitation policy documents.

The WHO’s constitution describes as one of its functions: the improvement of…, sanitation,…and other aspects of environmental hygiene. This is the basis on which the organization can execute its activities in the field of water, sanitation and health.

During the first decade of the WHO water and sanitation were a part of environmental sanitation together with food, housing etc. Environmental sanitation was defined as: the control of all those factors in man's physical environment which exercise or may exercise a deleterious effect on his physical, mental or social well-being. Methods for the safe and adequate disposal of excreta and sewage and clean and ample water supplies were among the priorities.

The rationale behind environmental sanitation and all subsequent water sanitation programmes was to minimize the burden of water associated ill-health. The two main categories of water related diseases are diarrhoeal diseases and vector-borne diseases. Water related ill-health has been for a very long time the main cause of morbidity and mortality, especially in the developing world. The diarrhoeal diseases are caused through direct contact, in any way, with water whereas the vector-borne diseases are transported to humans by insects. Both types of diseases therefore have a different association to water. The diarrhoeal diseases can be prevented through the provision of safe drinking water and the safe, hygienic disposal of human waste, especially excreta and hygienic behavior. From the water perspective, vector-borne diseases are fought through the proper management of water resources so as to prevent vectors a habitat. Throughout the WHO’s existence several approaches have been used to combat both types of diseases. With it came different programmes, a changing role for the WHO, a changing perception of the problems and possible solutions. But the rationale behind water sanitation has remained the same: to prevent water associated ill-health and through that ill-health's severe social and economic consequences.