

# Water and sanitation

## A fundamental right

Clean water and decent sanitation – taken for granted by many – remain a life and death issue in much of the developing world. Despite significant progress over recent decades, over a billion people – one sixth of the world's population – do not have access to safe water and 2.6 billion people lack sanitation. Sub-Saharan Africa has the lowest level of safe drinking water access, at 57 per cent. Its overall sanitation coverage is estimated at 36 per cent. South Asia's safe water supply access is relatively good at 84 per cent, but it has the lowest sanitation coverage, at 35 per cent. Asia, with 65 per cent of the world's population, accounts for the vast majority of people without access to improved water and sanitation services.

## Water and sanitation – every child's right

Access to water and sanitation is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that every child has the right to an adequate standard of living and to the highest attainable standard of health. Article 24 specifically commits countries to provide clean drinking water and ensure that parents and children are supported in the use of basic hygiene and sanitation.

## A public health disaster

Lack of clean water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene practices cause many child deaths and illnesses. Each year, 25 million people die from diseases caused by unsafe drinking water and lack of water for sanitation and basic hygiene. More than half of these deaths are those of children. Millions more are left underweight, mentally and physically disabled and vulnerable to disease.

One of the main consequences of inadequate sanitation and lack of clean water is diarrhoea. This is caused by bacteria or viruses and poses a particular threat to malnourished children, whose immune systems are less capable of fighting infection. Diarrhoea, if left untreated, leads to chronic dehydration. One way of treating it is to administer oral rehydration salts (ORS). ORS is a low-cost, pre-packaged, combination of salts and glucose, which, when mixed with clean water, replaces the fluids lost to diarrhoea.

## Women and girls

Inadequate water and sanitation has a particularly harmful impact on women and girls. Not only do they face the same health hazards as boys, but if water is not available within their community, women and children frequently have to

walk long distances to the nearest water source. This places physical demands on children and also means that they may be unable to attend school – missing out on their education because they carry the burden of collecting water.

Inadequate sanitation in schools is also a factor in preventing girls from obtaining an education. Where sanitary facilities are poor, or if no separate facilities exist for boys and girls, many girls are prevented from attending school by concerned parents. In addition, in many cultures women and girls often have to wait until after dark to use a field if there are no latrines in their household. Aside from the discomfort involved, this can also cause serious illnesses. Travelling long distances, often in the dark, also places women and girls at increased risk of harassment and sexual assault.

## The challenge ahead

To date, the gains made over the last decade have not kept pace with the increase in the world's population. As a result, the number of people without access to latrines has increased by around 400 million. Yet this situation can be tackled if there is the political will to do so.

## UNICEF's response

UNICEF works with community-based organisations

and families to ensure that households have access to a clean and secure supply of water, as well as safe and convenient sanitary facilities. Through hygiene promotion and environmental sanitation programmes, UNICEF works towards maximising the health benefits, focusing in particular on the survival, growth and development of young children.

UNICEF works towards making schools healthier and more attractive to children, especially girls, through school-based water, sanitation and hygiene programmes. Healthier children are more effective learners, and girls who spend less time fetching water have more time for school. Building separate and decent sanitation facilities in schools can reduce dropout rates. Hygiene promotion in schools also creates conditions where children themselves can be agents of change in their families and communities.

#### Water in emergencies

In emergency situations, safe water and sanitation are critical. UNICEF takes the lead in the provision of sanitation and water services in emergencies around the world. UNICEF has a long-established presence in this area within most countries and is often the first United Nations agency on the ground providing water and sanitation in emergencies.

#### UNICEF in Malawi

Efforts focus on preventing and reducing outbreaks of diseases through improved water and sanitation facilities, primarily at feeding centres. Pre-positioning of supplies and simple repairs of facilities are undertaken wherever necessary to ensure sufficient water is available to wash dishes and cooking utensils in a more hygienic way.

#### UNICEF in Niger

By the end of September 2005, 19,870 family water/sanitation kits had been delivered to partner groups for distribution to the families of malnourished children.

#### The Asia Tsunami

In the aftermath of the December 26th tsunami, hundreds of thousands of people were provided with access to adequate sanitation facilities, and more than a million people per day were being reached with safe water. Significantly, despite early fears of widespread disease, as a result of these and other actions no children died as a result of preventable diseases attributable to the tsunami.

#### UNICEF in Iran

The earthquake that hit Bam, Iran, in December 2003 left over 75,000 homeless people dependent on water supplies. UNICEF provided assistance within 48 hours of the earthquake, supplying 16 water tanks and thousands of emergency latrines, plastic sheets and water purification tablets for the local population. UNICEF was active in the planning of repairs to the water distribution system and offered technical assistance to other relief organisations in the area of water and sanitation.

#### UNICEF in Iraq

UNICEF is working in Baghdad to install three compact water treatment units (CUs) and rehabilitate a further 60 CUs to benefit over one million people. Rehabilitation works at water and sewage plants continue throughout the country. These offer better access to water, improving both the hygiene and health of Iraqi children.

#### UNICEF's water programmes

In Viet Nam, UNICEF promotes simple and cost-effective solutions to clean water shortages, such as rainwater jars, water filters, hand pumps and electric pumps. UNICEF also supports the construction of sanitation facilities in underserved areas, with the participation of local communities. Emphasis is given to improving families' knowledge and creating awareness of good hygiene practices at the household and community levels.

In Malawi, UNICEF supports the rehabilitation and installation of hand pumps. UNICEF also provides latrines for schools and works with parents' and teachers' associations, to encourage communities to get involved in the provision of safe water for schools. Moreover, UNICEF organises drama shows to create awareness about how to prevent and to manage cholera outbreaks.

In Somalia, UNICEF works with its partners to provide hand pumps on an emergency basis and supports planning and construction of good sanitation facilities in schools. UNICEF supports the rehabilitation of borewells to create mini water systems. It also works with community management teams and neighbourhood groups to maintain the systems and carry out educational awareness programmes for users, teachers and pupils.

#### How you can help

It costs only 3 pence to provide one packet of Oral Rehydration Therapy for one child to treat severe dehydration and diarrhoea, a leading cause of death among young children.

£45.91 can provide enough clean water to meet the early needs of ten families during the early stages of an emergency.

For more information about UNICEF's work to improve access to water and sanitation, visit: [www.unicef.org/wes](http://www.unicef.org/wes)

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