

Acces to Safe Water and sanitation in Europe Stagnating for over 15 years

Notice Prints

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Sections of the European population are still struggling with "traditional" environmental health problems, poor water and sanitation being one of the most urgent. The 22nd meeting of the European Environment and Health Committee (EEHC) will take place in Szentendre, Hungary, on 27-28 November 2006. It was in Hungary in 2004 that European ministers committed to protecting children's health from a harmful environment (see below). The EEHC meeting, hosted by the Regional Environmental Centre for Central and Eastern Europe, will assess progress in the European Region in reducing water-related disease among children.

According to a recent WHO estimate, 13 500 children under the age of 14 die every year from diarrhoea related to poor water, sanitation and hygiene. The largest contribution to this burden, with over 11 000 deaths, occurs in the EUR-B subregion. Access to safe water and sanitation has been stagnating for over 15 years and almost 140 million people, 16% of the European population, still live in homes that are not connected to a drinking-water supply. As a result, over 170 000 cases of water-related diseases were reported in Europe in 2006, including cases of viral hepatitis A (over 120 000), Shigella bloody diarrhoea (almost 40 000), enterohaemorrhagic Escherichia coli infection (over 7000) and typhoid fever (almost 6000). Reporting systems is not necessarily compatible in the European Region, and data can be underestimated.

Economic analysis supports investment in water supply and sanitation. In the European Region, achieving the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people without access to improved water supply and sanitation would generate a 300% return on any investment. This would mean providing access to safe water and sanitation for 64 million people, over 70% of whom live in the eastern part of the Region. If the target were broadened to all Europeans, the return on investment would be seven-fold.

The situation is of special concern for the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, where only a minor overall improvement in water supply was recorded between 1990 and 2004 (latest data). In rural areas the situation is worse, the proportion of the population living in homes connected to an improved source of water decreasing from 43% to 39% over the period. Water supply networks are in poor condition owing to faulty design and construction, lack of maintenance and ineffective operation as a result of the economic decline of the past decade. Leakage is generally high, and in many cases 30-50% of the water is lost.

Support to Member States

WHO has supported its European Member States in achieving sustainable access to safe water and sanitation through the Protocol on Water and Health, which came into force in 2005. This

international legally binding instrument aims at protecting human health and well-being by improving water management and preventing, controlling and reducing water-related diseases. It has been ratified by 20 countries in the Region. The first meeting of the parties will take place in Geneva on 17-19 January 2007.

The EEHC oversees progress made across the WHO European Region since the Fourth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Health, held in Budapest, Hungary, in June 2004, at which countries committed to reducing the burden of death and disease resulting from the exposure of children to environmental hazards. These commitments are set out in the Children's Environment and Health Action Plan, which aims to achieve four Regional Priority Goals on water and sanitation, accidents and injuries, air quality, and chemicals and other environmental factors.

More information can be found at <http://www.euro.who.int/eehc> and at the web site of the Regional Office's water and sanitation programme (<http://www.euro.who.int/watsan>).

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