

Unicef/who: far too few using improved sanitation; more people using drinking-water from safe sources

Medicine

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Posted on : 2008/7/17 12:10:00

NEW YORK/GENEVA, 17 July 2008 - Every day, over 2.5 billion people suffer from a lack of access to improved sanitation [1]and nearly 1.2 billion practise open defecation, the riskiest sanitary practice of all, according to a report issued today by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Drinking-water Supply and Sanitation (JMP).

The JMP report, titled "Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation - Special Focus on Sanitation," comes halfway through the International Year of Sanitation. The report assesses -- for the first time ever -- global, regional and country progress using an innovative "ladder" concept. This shows sanitation practices in greater detail, enabling experts to highlight trends in using improved, shared and unimproved sanitation facilities and the trend in open defecation. Similarly, the 'drinking water ladder' shows the percentage of the world population that uses water piped into a dwelling, plot or yard; other improved water sources such as hand pumps, and unimproved sources.

The number of people globally who lack access to an improved drinking water source[2] has fallen below one billion for the first time since data were first compiled in 1990. At present 87 per cent of the world population has access to improved drinking water sources, with current trends suggesting that more than 90 per cent will do so by 2015.

The number of people worldwide practising open defecation dropped from 24 per cent in 1990 to 18 per cent in 2006. The report also highlights disparities within national borders, particularly between rural and urban dwellers. Worldwide, there are four times as many people in rural areas – approximately 746 million – without improved water sources, compared to some 137 million urban dwellers.

Poor sanitation threatens children's survival as a faecally-contaminated environment is directly linked to diarrhoeal disease, one of the biggest killers of infants under the age of five. A clean environment is very difficult to ensure if open defecation is practised, even by a minority of the population.

“At current trends, the world will fall short of the Millennium sanitation target by more than 700 million people,” said Ann M. Veneman, UNICEF Executive Director. “Without dramatic improvements, much will be lost.”

However, more and more people are now using improved sanitation facilities - that is, facilities that

ensure human excreta are disposed of in a way that prevents them from causing disease by contaminating food and water sources.

Though the practice of open defecation is on the decline worldwide, 18 per cent of the world's population, totaling 1.2 billion people, still practise it. In southern Asia, some 778 million people still rely on this riskiest sanitation practice.

"We have today a full menu of low-cost technical options for the provision of sanitation in most settings" says Dr Margaret Chan, WHO's Director-General. "More and more governments are determined to improve health by bringing water and sanitation to their poorest populations. If we want to break the stranglehold of poverty, and reap the multiple benefits for health, we must address water and sanitation."

Real improvements in access to safe drinking water have occurred in many of the countries of southern Africa. According to the report, seven of the ten countries that have made the most rapid progress and are on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal drinking water targets are in sub-Saharan Africa (Burkina Faso, Namibia, Ghana, Malawi, Uganda, Mali, Djibouti). Of the countries not yet on track to meet the sanitation target, but making rapid progress, five are in sub-Saharan Africa (Benin, Cameroon, Comoros, Mali and Zambia).

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in over 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

About WHO

WHO is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. WHO has recognized the importance of water and sanitation from its inception.

About JMP

The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation is the official UN mechanism tasked with monitoring progress towards MDG Target 7c on drinking water supply and sanitation.