



Highlights

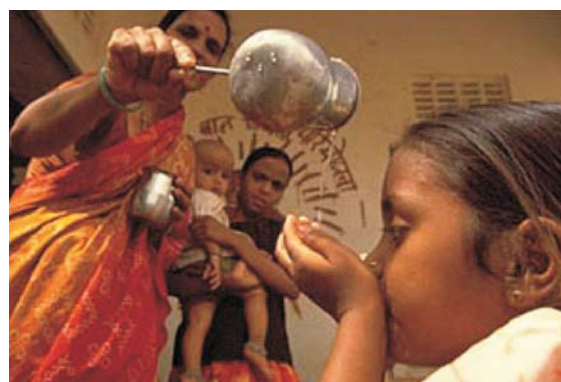
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Focus of the month

The last drop may be nigh!

“Water is essential for life!” This categorical and timeless statement is how Secretary General Kofi Annan announced the Water for Life decade (2005–2015). We are only perceiving the profoundness of these words in today’s alarming context of looming water scarcity at the global level. Indeed, communities and nations have grappled in isolation with the issue of drought, water pollution and water scarcity for centuries. But the past decade alone has put water scarcity on the global agenda as never before. It is as if we are seeing a catastrophe unfold before our very eyes. And as if we are relating to it directly because it will affect us personally and imminently: insufficient water may well happen within our own lifetime and not that of our children or grandchildren¹.

in the sweltering summer heat for the weekly water tanker to rumble by, unscheduled, to get their dose of amber-coloured water that may only be fit for washing. Still they wait. Why is it, then, that the same delay in the more affluent quarters of the same city is a crisis that gets immediate remedial action.



Children and Women are most affected of water shortage.



People gather to get water from a huge well in the village of Natwarghad in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

Now that such delays are connected to something as seemingly permanent and intractable as global warming, we will be facing a dramatically different reality. We need to wake up to the consequences of global warming on the availability of water with greater urgency, even though sustainable solutions may be a long way off.

Those dealing with the health of communities know that water and related concerns of sanitation cause at least 25% of the burden of disease in the world. Over 1.6 million people die every year because they lack access to safe water and sanitation, 90% of them among children under five, mostly in developing countries. And for every child that dies, countless others suffer from poor health, diminished productivity, and missed opportunities for education². Water pollution and the lack of water

The poor have endured and will continue to endure water shortages – sadly – as a part of life. Slum communities in cities in Asia wait patiently

¹Sir Nicholas Stern - The Stern Report on the Economics of Climate Change, 2007 available at the link http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/independent_reviews/stern_review_economics_climate_change/stern_review_report.cfm; and Al Gore’s documentary “An Inconvenient Truth”, 2006

²Dr Margaret Chan, Director-General, World Health Organization’s address on World Water Day 2007.



security will no doubt compound these lamentable statistics as the global population reaches an estimated 8.1 billion by 2030. To keep pace with the growing demand for food alone, 14% more fresh water will need to be allocated for agricultural purposes alone in the next 30 years³.

Aptly, World Water Day 2007, reminds us of the ominous water scarcity that the world will face if no timely action is taken now to check our habits of water use and conservation. This year's observance of the day, as always on 22 March, also reminds us of our obligations to optimize the use of water at the household level and in industry, enhance rain water harvesting and ground water recharge, and prevent pollution of our precious fresh water resources.

On this day, leaders of the United Nations community echoed their convergence towards conservation and protection of the ambient environment in order to assure the well-being of humanity. For its part, WHO expressed concern that diseases such as cholera, typhoid, malaria and dengue could rise due to climate change (e.g. more frequent flooding and droughts), resulting in unpredictable availability of fresh water.⁴ The Food and Agriculture Organization stated that coping with water scarcity was the "challenge of the 21st century" and that the bulk of that challenge lay in finding more effective ways to conserve, use and protect the world's water resources. The way forward was strengthening institutional capacity and governance at all levels, increasing technology transfer, mobilizing more financial resources, and scaling up good practices and lessons learned. UNESCO stressed that peace and poverty eradication were threatened by the growing scarcity and competition for water, and underlined the imperative to secure a more effective and equitable allocation of this vital resource⁵. Finally, the new UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon urged the integrated cross-border management of water resources to help the 700 million people around the world who currently do not have sufficient water to survive, a figure that could rise to more than 3 billion by 2025.

The words of these leaders surely echo within our own countries as we contemplate World Water Day 2008 and the many other world health-related days we congregate to celebrate. How can we make these more than mere intellectual or lip-service exercises? Should we not bring our conscience to bear on the inadequacy of our action? Global warming is an inexorable process upon us – or is it? Can we not identify and influence those who are in a position to do so, to energize a brighter process of mitigation and adaptation. We hope they will hear the siren, and feel

³Dr Jacques Diouf, Director-General of FAO's address on World Water Day 2007.

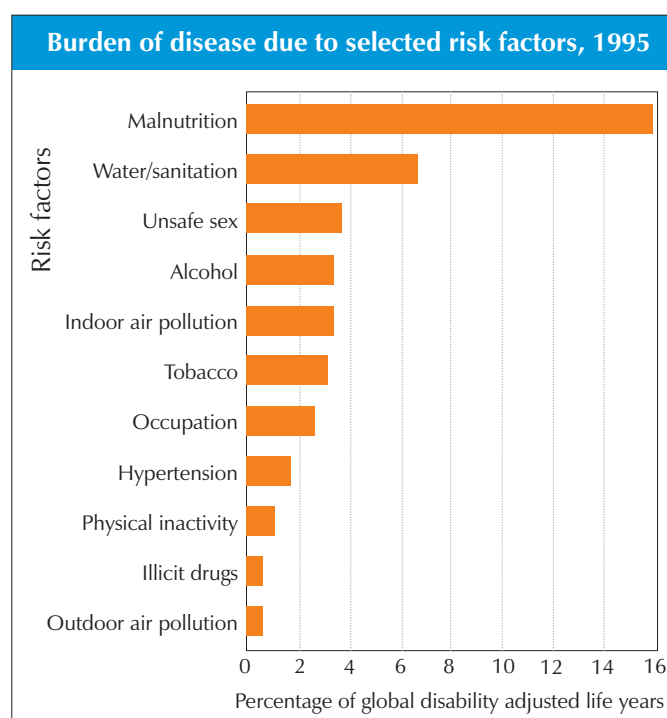
⁴Ibid – Margaret Chan

⁵UNESCO's DG Koichiro Matsuura's message on World Water Day 2007

the heat of the fire right behind, before it burns us alive on this, our beautiful planet.

“Sanitary Revolution” voted the greatest medical advance since 1840

In an opinion poll conducted by the British Medical Journal (BMJ), sanitation was voted the most important medical milestone since 1840, the year the journal was first published. A panel of editors and advisers selected 15 of 70 medical milestones submitted by BMJ readers for an in-depth review, and the highest number of readers chose clean water and sewage disposal systems – or the *sanitary revolution*. While sanitation may still not receive the policy and operational attention it deserves in developing countries, the health community is well aware that prevention against health hazards is often the best way to improve population health. The discovery of the prime role of sanitation in health protection is indeed the beginning of public health⁶.



Next only to malnutrition, poor water quality and sanitation contribute most to global ill-health (WHO).

For more details please refer to www.bmj.com/cgi/content/extract/334/7585/111-a.

Guidance Manual for Drinking Water Quality Assessment launched in India

On 2 April 2007, a Guidance Manual for Drinking Water Quality Assessment was launched at a function jointly

⁶The original champions of the sanitary revolution were John Snow, who showed that cholera was spread by water, and Edwin Chadwick, who came up with the idea of sewage disposal and piping water in to homes.

sponsored by WHO and the Ministry of Health in New Delhi, India, by visiting United States Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Mr Stephen L. Johnson. The manual, jointly prepared by the National Environmental Engineering Research Institute and the National Institute of Communicable Diseases in India contains methods for physical, chemical and biological parameters of water quality, which can be adopted by all

laboratories. It also outlines organizational structures, roles and responsibilities, and staff management and training. The manual – primarily prepared for water quality surveillance in India – will be helpful to other developing countries.

For more details please contact Mr A.K. Sengupta, WHO India at e-mail address senguptaak@searo.who.int.

SDE news

WHO Bangladesh calls for integrated water resources management

On 22 March, World Water Day was celebrated in Bangladesh at a seminar hosted by the Department of Public Health Engineering in Dhaka to address this year's theme: "Coping with Water Scarcity".



WHO Representative to Bangladesh addressing the seminar to celebrate World Water Day on 22 March 2007.

WHO Representative Dr Duangvadee Sungkhobol, special guest at the seminar, reminded the 300 participants that to define water scarcity in terms of water shortage was too simplistic. Even though Bangladesh appeared to have an abundance of fresh water supplies, scarcity here implies the paucity of safe water for human consumption because of degradation of groundwater and surface water quality, declining groundwater levels, and problems of water allocation due to competing uses. She therefore encouraged stakeholders to embrace the concept of integrated water resources management. Technical papers followed on the water scarcity problems in Bangladesh and called for concerted preventive action to protect and ensure adequate fresh water resources for all.

District level capacity for water and sanitation emergency preparedness in Nepal

In early 2006, the WHO Environmental Health unit in Nepal began efforts on capacity building for "Environmental



Mr Sharad Adhikari, National Programme Officer, WHO Nepal, conducting a session at the training programme.

Health in Emergencies". After an initial focus on raising awareness and capacity building for senior-level decision makers, attention is now on district level staff. Thus, since February 2007, the WHO Environmental Health unit has conducted two training programmes for district staff in Dharan at the B.P. Koirala Institute of Health Sciences, and in Pokhara. Master trainers from the Society of Public Health Engineers of Nepal (SOPHEN) conducted the sessions, and the WHO Emergency Preparedness and Response unit provided the funds, using SIDA support. So far, some 45 staff from the local administration, district water supply offices and NGOs (notably the Red Cross) have been trained in practical emergency response measures relating mainly to needs assessment, water quality and sanitation using local resources as much as possible. WHO, working in collaboration with UNICEF and other partners, will also prepare rosters of those trained so that relevant human and other resources can be quickly mobilized in cases of emergencies such as earthquakes, landslides or flash-floods.

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Healthy Lekhnath Municipality in Nepal zeroes in on sanitation

In March 2007, in three of its low-income wards, the Lekhnath Municipality in Nepal launched a participatory



Noon discussions on latrines in Simle tole.

programme to improve sanitation. Lekhnath already has an active health and population database for planning and targeting vulnerable wards. Simle tole is one such remote

ward that has constructed a small piped scheme, and started advocacy on personal home hygiene such as using a toothbrush and washing with soap. Currently the people of Simle tole only have temporary latrines. The municipality and the Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) are working with WHO support to enact suitable sanitation measures. Eventually, the Lekhnath municipality hopes to develop tourism in the local area to provide bed-and-breakfast facilities to trekkers visiting the nearby Begnas and Rupakot lakes. Good sanitation would be a major facet of that programme.

In the Healthy City Programme in Nepal, promotion of municipal policy and practice for adequate water supply (water quality, conservation and rainwater collection), sanitation and drainage have received increasing attention through DUDBC. WHO supported the development of the Urban Development Policy in 2006, which reflects the Healthy City concept, and provided capacity-building and piloting support to DUDBC.

For more details contact Mr Han Heijnen, WHO Nepal at the e-mail address hanheijnen@gmail.com.

EH NEWS

HDR – 2006 flags the global water crisis



The Human Development Report (HDR) is published each year by UNDP focusing on some of the most challenging issues facing humanity. HDR 2006, carrying the theme “Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty, and the Global Water Crisis”, was released in November 2006 in Cape

Town, South Africa. The report highlights causes and consequences of the deepening global water crisis, social and economic forces that drive water shortage and articulates a concerted drive to achieve water and sanitation for all through international cooperation and national action plans⁷.

Excerpts from the report remind us that clean water and sanitation are powerful drivers for human development

⁷The report also carries the views of distinguished guests like Gordon Brown, M.P., Chancellor of the Exchequer, United Kingdom; Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, former Finance Minister of Nigeria; President Luna of Brazil, former United States President Carter and former United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan.

and the most powerful preventive medicines available to governments to reduce infectious disease and improve the quality of life. Despite the existence of technologies and resources, at the dawn of the 21st century 1.1 billion people are denied the right to clean water, and 2.6 billion people lack access to basic sanitation, which overwhelmingly affects the poor. The world is facing water crisis that if left unchecked will derail progress towards MDGs. The report underlines that unsafe water and poor sanitation are, together, the world’s second biggest killer of children (1.8 million each year); that close to half of all people in developing countries suffer from health problems linked to water and sanitation, which is holding back economic growth and poverty reduction; millions of women and young girls are forced to spend hours collecting water, which restricts their opportunities and choices. The view that the current water crisis is due to a physical shortage is rejected; it argues that the roots of the crisis can be traced to poverty, inequality, unequal power relationships and flawed water management policies. The fear that water will become a source of conflict and war is considered exaggerated; authors rather advocate for making water a right by drawing up national strategies for water and sanitation and increase international aid. The lead author, Kevin Watkins, cautions that looking back over the decade, we are obliged to conclude that water and sanitation have suffered from an excess of words and not enough action.

For more details, please refer to <http://hdr.undp.org/hdr2006/>

Visits and Missions

Susanne Weber-Mosdorf visits SEARO

Assistant Director-General for Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments (SDE), Ms Susanne Weber-Mosdorf visited WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia (SEARO) on 7-9 March 2007. While in New Delhi, she attended the Globalization, Trade and Health consultation, had discussions with the Regional Director, Dr Samlee Plianbangchang and his senior management team, Regional Office SDE colleagues, the WHO Representative to India and his staff, and senior officials in the Ministry of Health. She emphasized the need for us to energize the pursuit of a public health approach to environmental management. This approach brings to the fore the question of how much disease could be prevented through better management of our environment. And how can we look beyond the health sector for preventive action. She highlighted the need to look ahead and anticipate the kind of health impacts that are in store and seek to influence visionary public policy. But while we have our eyes on the horizon, we must also make sure our approaches and their applicability are pragmatic enough to make a difference at national level, and that this is backed by the strategic alignment of the regional and global levels of WHO to address the defined needs of our Member countries.



Ms Weber-Mosdorf also visited Sulabh International, a nongovernmental organization in New Delhi, to observe its ground-breaking work on sanitation, and meet its pioneer, Mr Bindeshwar Pathak.

Maldives to streamline WATSAN action

Maldives, with a new Ministry of Environment, Energy and Water created in 2005, is calling for coordinated efforts in the sector. Responding to its request, acting WHO Regional



Community rain water harvesting system in Maldives.

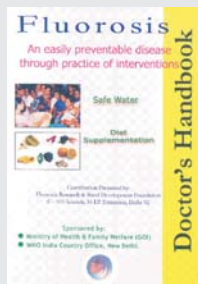
Adviser Dr Jagdish Barot provided technical support from 4 to 9 March 2007 to develop a national Master Plan for the WATSAN sector, and generate greater coordination among national partners. Together with a multisectoral national forum, Dr Barot reviewed current roles, responsibilities and future planning needs. It was agreed that WHO would assist in the formulation of quality standards for drinking water, approaches for wastewater disposal and safe rainwater collection, and establish a water quality monitoring system. Maldives has already developed an effective nationwide system of rainwater harvesting to meet the drinking water needs of its many island communities. Thus, protection measures for improving the quality of rainwater and its storage were next on the agenda. Sewerage disposal issues beyond the capital island of Male, including solid and medical waste, and the post-tsunami programme are also priorities on the table. However, there is a huge need for good coordination to streamline the work of these many projects carried out by local and international NGOs.

Upcoming event

- Global Meeting of Environmental Health Focal Points, WHO Headquarters, Geneva, 26-27 April 2007

Publications and Learning Materials

Doctor's Handbook on Fluorosis released in India



The Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare, India, released on 13 March 2007 the "Doctor's Handbook on Fluorosis". WHO facilitated the preparation of the handbook. Fluorosis, a painful and crippling disease, has made the lives of millions of people in India miserable and under-productive. The disease is caused by chemical poisoning entering the

human body via drinking water, food, industrial emissions, drugs and dental products laced with fluoride. This handbook explains that fluorosis is easily preventable with early diagnosis, describes ways to treat consequences, and provides approaches to preventing its occurrence.

For further information please contact Mr A.K. Sengupta at WHO India at e-mail address senguptaak@searo.who.int.

Water Sanitation and Health Newsletter

The Water, Sanitation and Health Newsletter prepared by WHO/HQ can be obtained by writing to listserv@who.int with "subscribe WATERSANITATION" in the subject line.

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