

Environmental Health Update

Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments



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Focus of the month

World Health Day 2009 calls for health facilities that can stand and function when disaster strikes

**Save lives:
make hospitals
safe in
emergencies**



Vision and commitment are needed from many sectors: planning, finance, public works, urban planning, and architecture.

“We are calling one million people to help us tell decision-makers that our hospitals must be made safe from disaster”. This is the clarion call of the WHO SEARO World Health Day Click-a-Brick web campaign. The campaign is unique, while being in the intangible realm. Getting a million people to click on a virtual brick by

spreading awareness through the social media and constructing at least 10 virtual hospitals is the objective of this campaign. The campaign highlights the crying need to have structurally sound, fully functional health-care facilities with all necessary equipment and utilities intact that will continue to be available to the people of the region who have been affected directly or indirectly by the ravages of natural calamities or disasters triggered by human activity.

The health sector’s response in such situations is confined to the area it knows best: that of taking care of the sick. While a focused view on health is a take-off point for this call to save lives by making health facilities safe, this is not exclusive to the health sector alone. The need for health assistance to the critically urgent needs of victims is a burning necessity and challenge that the health sector must rise to. This is as much a challenge for others as well. The responsibility of achieving this goal lies with governments, civil society, architects, engineers, the academia and, most importantly, communities and the general public.

The opportunities of the “golden hour” – that crucial window in time during which most of the affected or injured persons can be saved in a post-disaster situation if emergency aid is reached on time – can be only effectively undertaken when we have our hospitals standing in the wake of a disaster. This calls for structurally sound infrastructure and functionally prepared health facilities that are well planned with awareness and anticipation of disasters to come.

The countries of the WHO South-East Asia Region are not strangers to the havoc that disasters bring, particularly in the aftermath of washed away health facilities. During 1996-2005, natural disasters killed over half a million people in the Region, which is close to 60 per cent of the world’s total deaths from natural disasters during this period. These events also made casualties of the health facilities, thereby incapacitating communities that depended on them. Memories of recent disasters are still fresh on our minds. Millions of people across the Region are still trying to cope with the aftermath of the devastating Gujarat earthquake of January 2001, the calamitous tsunami of December 2004, and the merciless sweep of cyclones Sidr and Nargis in Bangladesh and Myanmar more recently. Thousands lost their lives in these disasters and millions were injured, maimed or rendered homeless. Health facilities in the frontline of such emergencies are a lifeline for those injured who can be saved if treated during the golden hour. And even after that, these are the bastions of succour for refugees that flee the devastations caused by both natural and man-made disasters. They are the edifices of refuge and symbols of caring. Humanitarian relief usually originates at these health facilities and gradually spreads to the entire community through various forms such as mass immunization, distribution of foodstuffs, caring programmes for the sick, or even to provide a safe refuge to the injured.

Highlights

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Water
It is precious.





Hospitals are safe from disasters when health services are accessible and functioning, at maximum capacity, immediately after disasters or in emergencies.

This is the groove that the health sector must necessarily occupy in national disaster preparedness action plans and, more importantly, disaster risk reduction, and bolster the same with the capacity to provide timely and effective health

service. Let the message of World Health Day 2009 be the one to galvanize national health leaders to see service delivery in a new light.

It is not just the quality of the staff that forms the essence of the health system, but also the physical-structural integrity of structures that must withstand the onslaught of a warming global environmental climate whose victims are becoming more the norm than the exception.

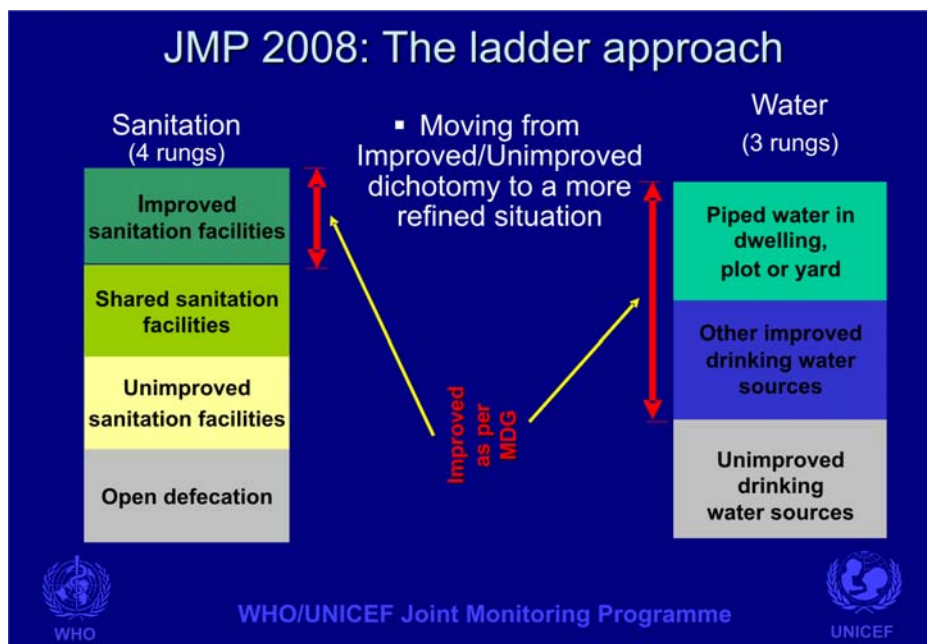
The call for a million people to support this public health cause, when heeded, will comprise a small percentage of those affected in the calamities that recurrently strike most Member countries in the Region whether sporadically or over a long period. Clicking a brick is all it takes to spread the word. Let this not be viewed as a trivial or far-removed act but a meaningful one wherein with every click of the mouse a virtual safe hospital becomes a closer reality and with every email to a friend awareness is built and many new advocates for health facilities that can save lives when they are needed the most are born. *For details contact Dr Roderico Ofrin at orfrinr@searo.who.int*

SDE News

JMP workshop in Bangladesh clarifies on persistent data concerns

WHO and UNICEF held a Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) national workshop on 12 January 2009 to reconcile differences between the official estimates of water supply and sanitation coverage and those reported by the UN Agencies. The Deputy Secretary (Water Supply), Local Government Division, chaired a meeting that comprised about 20 sector professionals from the Department of Public Health Engineering, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology,

International Training Network, and the WHO and UNICEF country offices. WHO introduced the "ladder approach" and clarified the objectives and analytical framework of the JMP, supplementing this with definitions used in categorizing "improved" and "unimproved" sanitation. The meeting noted that definitional ambiguities were the root cause of the statistical discrepancy in sanitation coverage, and that information that included more details on latrine types in data surveys would help avoid mistakes in the future. Dr Rifat Hossain and Dr Andrew Trevett attended from WHO. *For details contact Dr Andrew Trevett at trevetta@searo.who.int*



Nepal village upscales ecological sanitation

With over 120 ecosan toilets now operational, Darechowk village in Chitwan district is on its way to upscaling the practice of eco sanitation. Made of mud masonry or using split-bamboo walls, many toilets are in good use already, fertilizing the fields and yet maintaining a sanitary environment.



Currently there are over 120 ecosan toilets. Some are made using split-bamboo walls

Darechowk village—a cluster of farming households producing oranges, cabbage and cauliflower—is located at a 3-hour brisk trekking distance and an altitude of 1000 meters from the level of the highway. Encouraged by a sanitation training course he attended in Bharatpur in 2007, Shreerendra Pokharel, the headmaster of the Majhgaun Lower Secondary School, convinced the community to embark on a sanitation programme stewarded by

the school. This triggered considerable interest in the community on adopting ecosan latrines since the accumulated urine could be diverted for use in farms.

Darechowk is doing well from the sale of tasty oranges and sanitation is progressing in all the clusters in the Village Development Committee (VDC) area, with ecological sanitation fast becoming the preferred choice. As building materials are expensive, people use local materials primarily for the toilet superstructure. This accessibility enables people to have safe sanitation, and the urine diverted is used in agriculture. The community now has plans to convert the village into an ecological tourism area, with trekking routes and "bed-and-breakfast" facilities. For details contact Mr Han Heijnen at hanheijnen@gmail.com

Maldives establishes new Environment Protection Agency (EPA)

Maldives has abolished the Environment Research Centre and the Maldives Water and Sanitation Authority and sanctioned the establishment of a new Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The work that was carried out by these two offices will now be done by this new agency. Following this change, the Transport Authority and Environment Protection Agency will be linked to the Ministry of Housing, Transport and Environment. The two offices will also operate as regulatory authorities administered under a governing board. For details contact Dr Jorge Mario Luna at lunaj@who.org.mv

EH News

Baa atoll in Maldives says no to plastic bags

Baa Atoll in Maldives has launched an ambitious campaign aimed at reducing and eventually eliminating the use of plastic shopping bags. The "Say no to plastic bags" campaign, run by the Kendhoo Island Club and Sonevaa Fushi tourist resort, will distribute cloth bags to each household in this atoll as a step towards discouraging the people from using plastic bags. This green step stems from a growing awareness about the detriment caused by the surfeit of plastic bags that is now evident from their clutter in the lagoons, on the beaches and among the beautiful corals of the islands. Plastic bags are known to destroy live coral and adversely affect marine life in Maldives.

The programme is being piloted in Kendhoo and will be introduced to the rest of the atoll after a three-month trial period. The organizers have requested the support of the Environmental Research Center (now the EPA) on creating more awareness of this menacing threat to the environment. Gradually, even the hitherto most diehard users of plastic bags, among them shopkeepers, are coming around to the idea and encouraging their customers and others to switch to cloth bags. The Sonevaa Fushi tourist resort in Baa Atoll, known for its environmental consciousness, is donating cloth bags for this campaign.

Visits and missions

Mission to Sri Lanka

Dr A-Sattar Yoosuf, Director, Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, WHO SEARO, visited Sri Lanka on 18-20 February 2009 to review the World Health Organization's SDE Programme in that country and attend the Regional Consultation on Social Determinants of Health with the theme "Addressing the Health Inequities". He also met senior officials of the Ministry of Health, and discussed at multisectoral forums the progress of the National Environmental Health Action Plans (NEHAPs) and related preparations and plans. He also discussed with officials of the Ministry of Health and others, the modalities for reviving the Healthy Settings process in the country. *For details contact Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf at yoosufa@searo.who.int*

National Healthy Settings Coordinators' Training Workshop, Indonesia

Dr A-Sattar Yoosuf (Director, SDE, WHO/SEARO) visited Yogyakarta, Indonesia, from 23-27 February 2009 to conduct a National Healthy Settings Coordinators' Training Workshop. The training was aimed at making those engaged in community health development programmes better understand the concept of Healthy Settings as it relates to sustainable health action in communities. Imparting a package of skills needed to carry out community mobilization and programme management was also a part of the training. Thirty local participants with a mix of experience from the health, environment, education, agriculture and land, universities, and community development institutes attended. The six module-based, short training courses included knowledge and skills related to health and development, health promotion, healthy settings practice, community health programme planning and management, good governance, and resource mobilization. All these are useful tools to enable settings coordinators to do a superior job of programme management and community mobilization. Dr Sattar Yoosuf and Prof. Surinder Agarwal of Delhi University facilitated the three-day event that also included a field visit to three healthy settings in a district neighbouring

Yogyakarta. *For details contact Dr Abdul Sattar Yoosuf at yoosufa@searo.who.int*

Expert Training Course on Ecological Sanitation for Bhutan

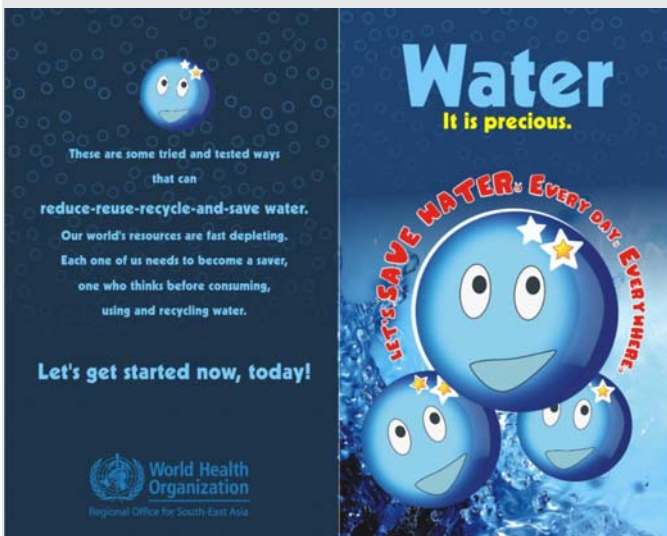
To support the Royal Government of Bhutan to introduce ecological sanitation technologies, WHO/SEARO organised a two-week Ecosan Expert Training Course in Kathmandu, Nepal, from 26 January to 6 February 2009. A total of 16 professionals consisting of public health engineers, health workers, agriculture extension officers and schoolteachers from four districts, and four participants from the Public Health Engineering Division (PHED), Ministry of Health, attended. The interactive training course was conducted by Seecon International. UNICEF Bhutan supported eight course participants with the aim of implementing ecological sanitation in Bhutanese schools. The participants were briefed on the concept of ecosan, and the health aspects of safe use of urine and composted faeces in agriculture.

The participants developed a detailed workplan of piloting ecosan in three villages and two schools in Bhutan. A training report is available and can be shared with those who are interested in having a copy. *For details contact Ms Payden at payden@searo.who.int*



Participants getting hands-on training: application of urine around a peach tree

Publications and learning materials



The booklet was published by WSH/SDE/SEARO on the occasion of World Water Day on 22 March 2009. It gives an overview of the state of the world's fresh water resources, and the impact of pollution and climate change on the same. The booklet gives very useful tips on saving water or using water wisely in different settings and on different occasions. It demonstrates simple actions that can be done by each and every individual. It urges all readers to please remember that however small the contribution may be, any saving of water will go a long way in conserving and protecting the most precious resource on earth—water.

The booklet calls on us to get started right away, and save water today for a healthier tomorrow. For details contact Ms Payden at payden@searo.who.int

World Water Day 2009 celebrations in Maldives

Ministry of Housing, Transport and Environment (MHTE) organized two seminars in Male and Kandooma Island on 22 March and 23 March respectively to mark World Water Day 2009. The theme of the seminars was water conservation and protection. Students participated actively in the



Groups getting ready for tree planting at Kandooma Island

discussions at these seminars. Students also planted more than 300 saplings along the coastal beach in Kandooma Island to help check soil erosion.

The WHO Country Office Maldives sponsored a celebration of World Water Day at Seenu Hithadhoo Island organized by local NGO Maavahi on 21 March 2009. The theme of the activity was “Environmental protection and Sustainable livelihood”. Students of four schools and local government offices (such as the local hospital, police station and provincial office) participated in the celebrations. The signing of a commitment to protect the environment and natural resources as also the planting of trees were a part of the programme.

SDE Team has grown:

As of 25 February 2009, the SDE group in SEARO has grown with the addition of five more technical units. The inclusion of the External Coordination Unit (ECU), Emergency & Humanitarian Action (EHA), Strategic Alliance and Partnerships (SAP), Intellectual Property Rights, Trade & Health (IPT) and Sustainable Health Policy (SHP) further enhances the SDE's reach to enable a still more comprehensive work domain. See details below, in the “SDE focal points” section of this Newsletter.

TIPS for Green Behaviour

Eco-friendly canvas bags

When you're deciding between paper and plastic at the grocery store, choose neither. Plastic takes 1000 years to decompose and the use of paper bags around the world leads to the felling of 14 million trees a year. Instead, an easy eco-friendly measure is to use cloth grocery bags. Any cloth bag will do. These can also be reused a number of times. The Internet provides the names of several websites which sell organic cotton canvas bags made without the use of pesticides.

Alternatively, use an organic mesh bag for organic produce. Eco-friendly experts urge consumers to consider the amount of packaging that they come across in the grocery store. Since petroleum-based packaging isn't good for the environment, items that use minimal packaging should be bought and supported.

This easy eco-friendly tip may cost you a little more money in buying organic products. But it's a green step because it takes less energy and zero pesticides to harvest organic products and so it's healthier for the planet.

Significant events of the Quarter

- 4th high-level meeting on Environment and Health in South-East and East Asian Countries, Beijing, China, 24-25 March 2009. For details visit: <http://www.environment-health.asia>
- 3rd International Conference on Children's Health and the Environment, Busan, Republic of Korea, 7-10 June 2009.

SDE Focal Points

Country Offices

- **Bangladesh:** Dr Andrew Trevett, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO Bangladesh (trevetta@searo.who.int)
- **Bhutan:** Mr Norbhu Wangchuk, NPO-Programmes and Administration, WHO Bhutan (norbhu@who.org.bt)
- **DPR Korea:** WHO Acting Representative Dr S. Puri (puris@whoprk.org)
- **India:** Mr A.K. Sengupta, NPO-Environment, WHO India (senguptaak@searo.who.int)
- **Indonesia:** Mr Sharad Adhikary, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO Indonesia (adhikarys@who.ir.id)
- **Maldives:** Ms Laila Ali, NPO-Programmes and Administration, WHO Maldives (laila@who.org.mv)
- **Myanmar:** Ms Margareta Patricia Skold, Scientist (PHA), WHO Myanmar (skoldm.whomm@undp.org)
- **Nepal:** Mr Han Heijnen, Environmental Health Adviser, WHO Nepal (hanheijnen@gmail.com)
- **Sri Lanka:** Dr H. Yakandawalah, WHO Sri Lanka (yakandawalah@whosrilanka.org)
- **Thailand:** Dr Arun Mallik, WHO Thailand (Emergency/ Humanitarian issues) (mallik@searo.who.int), Mr Chawalit Tantinitkul (Food Safety issues), Dr Adisak Sattam (Other Environmental Health issues) (adisak@searo.who.int)
- **Timor-Leste:** Dr Paramita Sudharto, Acting WHO Representative (searo.who.int)

Regional Office, New Delhi, India

- **Dr A. Sattar Yoosuf**, Director, Department of Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments (SDE) (yoosufa@searo.who.int)
- **Mr Alexander von Hildebrand**, Regional Adviser, Environmental Health and Climate Change (hildebranda@searo.who.int)
- **Ms Payden, Regional Adviser**, Water and Sanitation for Health (payden@searo.who.int)
- **Dr Salma Burton**, Regional Adviser, Occupational and Environmental Health (burtions@searo.who.int)
- **Dr Yonas Tegegn**, Regional Adviser, Strategic Alliance and Partnerships (tegegn@searo.who.int)
- **Dr Rui Paulo de Jesus**, Technical Officer, Sustainable Health Policy (Jesusr@searo.who.int)
- **Mr Pak Chang Rim**, Coordinator, External Coordination Unit (rimpak@searo.who.int)
- **Ms Maria Mauela Bromson**, Technical Officer, External Resource Mobilization (enwerembromsonm@searo.who.int)
- **Dr Roderico Ofrin**, Regional Adviser, Emergency & Humanitarian Action (ofrinr@searo.who.int)
- **Ms Karin Timmermans**, Technical Officer, Intellectual Property Rights and Trade & Health (timmermansk@searo.who.int)
- **Dr Manisha Shridhar**, TIP-IPT, Intellectual Property Rights and Trade & Health (Shridharm@searo.who.int)

Previous issues of Environmental Health Update are available at
http://www.searo.who.int/en/Section23_12688.htm