On 19 November 2016, we will be celebrating the third World Toilet Day. This day was designated by the United Nations General Assembly in 2013 with a Call to Action aimed at eliminating open defecation by 2025 and to strengthen partnerships to achieve this goal. World Toilet Day is designed to raise awareness and inspire action to tackle the global sanitation crisis – a crisis because today, 2.4 billion people are still struggling to stay well, keep their children healthy and work their way to a better future – all for the want of a toilet.

Across the WHO South-East Asia Region as a whole, significant progress was made towards achieving the sanitation Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with more than one third of the population gaining access to improved sanitation. Congratulations to Maldives, Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Thailand for meeting the targets, and for the ‘good’ progress that was reported in almost all other countries in our Region. Despite this significant progress, almost 750 million people in our Region still do not have access to improved sanitation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), launched in 2015, include a target to ensure that everyone everywhere has access to toilets by 2030. This makes sanitation a global development priority. The target is more challenging than that set out in the MDGs. During the MDG era, sanitation achievement was measured in terms of availability of infrastructure while the hygienic use of toilets and the health impacts of subsequent management of and disposal of fecal matter were not considered.

Hence, the focus in the SDG is therefore on behaviour change and service delivery. SDG Target 6.2 is for sanitation and hygiene and aims by 2030 to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, and to end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations. The global indicator will be the proportion of population using safely managed sanitation services including handwashing facilities with soap and water, with safely managed defined as population using an improved sanitation facility that is not shared with other households and where excreta are safely disposed in situ.
or transported and treated off-site. A WHO burden of disease for diarrhoea estimated in 2014 shows that moving from no sanitation to improved sanitation yields modest health gains (16% reduction in diarrhoea). But when excreta are properly removed from household, treated and safely disposed, it results in an additional 63% reduction in diarrhoea.

WHO is committed to supporting delivery of sanitation improvements, both in the wider community and in health facilities because of the significant role that sanitation plays in health. Some of the Health SDG targets specifically seek to combat waterborne diseases (Target 3.3) and to substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination (Target 3.9). Safely managed sanitation is an essential tool in achieving this and also in helping to address concerns related to antimicrobial resistance through reducing the level of antibiotic residues, AMR bacteria and genes in the wastewater and environment.

WHO SEARO’s main work in safely managed sanitation is in helping countries to establish national targets for the SDGs, assessing WASH in health-care facilities to establish a baseline for the SDGs, and in promoting Sanitation Safety Plans. Preventing exposure to human waste, especially in dense urban settings, requires safe management of the entire sanitation chain involving multiple actors and exposed groups in the collection, transport, treatment, disposal and use of sanitation waste. So while for most of us, our involvement in sanitation is simply through the use of a toilet, safely managed sanitation requires so much more essential work after the toilet is flushed in terms of identification of risks, risk groups and management of those risks as the waste flows from toilet through the environment. WHO has developed Sanitation Safety Plans as a tool to help sanitation system operators maximize health benefits and minimize health risks in their systems. Sanitation Safety Planning can help coordinate efforts of the many stakeholders along the sanitation chain – including departments of health, utilities, private sector, environment and agriculture – to maximize the health benefits of sanitation and stimulate policy dialogue and change. The first large Sanitation Safety Planning training was held in Kolkata earlier this year.

World Toilet Day is an important new addition to the designated days, highlighting the urgent development need to fulfil this human right. On this important day, let’s pledge to improve the health and well-being of the 750 million people in the Region by helping them to gain access to the most basic service – a toilet.

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