

Dying for A Drink of Clean Water

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In the United States and Europe, people take it for granted that when they turn on their taps, clean water will flow out. But for those living in U.S. cities devastated by Hurricane Katrina, as in large parts of the world, obtaining safe water requires a constant struggle.

Water is essential to all aspects of life, yet 99 percent of water on Earth is unsafe or unavailable to drink. About 1.2 billion people globally lack safe water to consume and 2.6 billion do not have access to adequate sanitation. There are also stark comparisons: Just one flush of a toilet in the West uses more water than most Africans have to perform an entire day's washing, cleaning, cooking and drinking.

Ensuring access to safe water worldwide is imperative. Water is an economic issue since it is essential for poverty reduction, agriculture, food and energy production, as well as recreation. It is a women's issue in the developing world because women have primary responsibility for household water gathering in many of these countries. Time spent hauling water robs women and girls of getting an education or engaging in meaningful work. It is a children's issue because water is essential for healthy development. A youngster dies every eight seconds from water-borne disease. And water is a national security issue because some of the world's conflicts today arise from disputes over arable land and water: The tragedy in Darfur, for example, was driven in no small part by tensions over access to water.

But most of all, water is a fundamental global health issue. Unsafe water and sanitation is now the single largest cause of illness worldwide, just as it has been a major threat to the health of people affected by Hurricane Katrina. A recent U.N. report has estimated that:

- At least 2 million people, most of them children, die annually from water-borne diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, dysentery, typhoid, guinea worm and hepatitis as well as such illnesses as malaria and West Nile virus carried by mosquitoes that breed in stagnant water.
- Many of the 10 million child deaths that occurred last year were linked to unsafe water and lack of sanitation. Children can't fight off infections if their bodies are weakened by water-borne diseases.
- Over half of the hospital beds in the developing world are occupied by people suffering from preventable diseases caused by unsafe water and inadequate sanitation.

If action is not taken now, 135 million people could die of water-related diseases by the year 2020. That is a larger number than those expected to fall victim to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, a catastrophe that has already killed 23 million people worldwide.

Furthermore, water plays a critical role in this disease since many deaths from AIDS are linked to illnesses resulting from dehydration and diarrhea caused by unsafe water.

The United Nations has set a Millennium Development Goal -- to be reached by 2015 -- of reducing by half the percentage of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. There is a long way to go to reach this goal. That's why the U.N. General Assembly has declared the next 10 years to be the International Decade for Action on "Water for Life" to focus attention on this vital issue.

When poor people are asked what would most improve their lives, water and sanitation is repeatedly one of their highest priorities. We should heed their call. The recent decision by the leaders of the Group of Eight nations to double economic assistance for Africa has the potential to help if a significant portion of this aid goes to address the problems of water and sanitation. Developing countries should involve their citizens in decision making about how best to get improved water and sanitation services to their people. And developed nations should work with the ideas and aspirations of those countries and people they are seeking to help -- particularly women -- so that improvements can be sustained over the long term.

Nations in both the developing and developed world must share knowledge and experiences in public education, disease prevention, emergency response strategies, the application of new technologies and training. A global coalition of organizations, businesses and individuals must be mobilized across the public and private sectors for infrastructure development and innovation.

Time is of the essence. By 2025 the world's population is projected to increase from 6.4 billion to 8.4 billion. At that time, 3.4 billion people could live in countries where water is scarce. Today we are talking about our planet as a global village. With coordinated efforts and a large influx of funding, the Gulf Coast region of the United States will, we hope, restore its water and sanitation systems within months. But unless we soon implement a global action plan for water with increased awareness, activism and resources, large numbers of people around the world will continue to suffer and die needlessly for generations to come for want of clean water.

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