



## THE UN DEPUTY SECRETARY-GENERAL'S Call to Action on **SANITATION**

Under United Nations leadership, considerable progress has been made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and reducing the number of people living in extreme poverty. In developing regions, the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day fell from 47 per cent in 1990 to 24 per cent in 2008.

But there are still over one billion living in extreme poverty, or about 16 per cent of the global population. Fifteen per cent of the world's people practice open defecation, one of the clearest manifestations of extreme poverty.

Recognizing that greater progress on sanitation is essential for fighting poverty and for achieving all the MDGs, United Nations Deputy Secretary-General Jan Eliasson is initiating, on behalf of the Secretary-General, a renewed effort to drive progress on sanitation and water goals as we head towards 2015. The initiative builds on the strong commitment already made by Member States to take action through the Sanitation Drive to 2015 endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2010. Progress on sanitation will promote better health and a sounder environment, especially for the most vulnerable women and children of our world. It will allow the poorest people in the world to live in fuller dignity.

Tackling sanitation challenges is key to advancing human development. The Deputy Secretary-General is aiming to bring together key partners from government, civil society, business and international organizations to commit to action. The aim is to mobilize resources to rapidly increase access to basic sanitation, with a focus on improving hygiene, changing social norms and better managing human waste and waste-water and ending open defecation. By 2025, the practice of open defecation must be totally eliminated.

### **The problem: Ending open defecation is essential to fighting poverty and achieving the MDGs**

Of the world's seven billion people, six billion have mobile phones. Yet only 4.5 billion people have access to toilets or latrines -- meaning that two and a half billion people, mostly in rural areas, do not have proper sanitation. In the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there are 1.1 billion people still defecating in the open.

The Millennium Development Goals have raised the awareness of sanitation needs and have helped mobilize action -- 1.8 billion people have gained access to toilets or latrines since 1990. But we still have far to go.

An affront to personal dignity, open defecation perpetuates the vicious cycle of disease and entrenched poverty. In fact, countries where open defecation is most widely practiced are the countries with the highest numbers of under-five year child deaths, high levels of under-nutrition and poverty, and large wealth disparities. .../...



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Open defecation goes hand-in-hand with extreme poverty. In many countries, 95 per cent or more of the poorest fifth of the population practices open defecation. Despite progress since 1990, the poorest 40 per cent have seen minimal change. One out of every four people in the least developed countries practices open defecation.

Ending open defecation is not just about building toilets and latrines. Poor sanitation has a direct impact on health, nutrition, education, gender equality and poverty reduction. Its persistence undermines global investment in these areas. Ending open defecation will lead to a 35 per cent reduction in diarrhoea, which now results in over three quarters of a million deaths of children under five annually. Children in developing countries often experience four to five debilitating bouts of diarrhoea each year, which can cause and worsen malnutrition. More than one-third of under-five deaths are attributable to under-nutrition.

Having to go outside the safety of their homes in order to relieve themselves makes women and girls vulnerable to violence. Girls are often reluctant to attend school, and parents are disinclined to send them, if there are no safe, private toilets for them to use.

### **Sanitation makes economic sense**

Doing nothing is costly. Every US\$1 spent on sanitation brings a US\$5.50 return by keeping people healthy and productive. Poor sanitation, on the other hand, costs countries between 0.5 and 7.2 per cent of their GDP. The global economic gains from investing in sanitation and water are estimated at US\$260 billion per year.

### **Solutions exist: The time for action is now**

With a thousand days for action before the 2015 MDG deadline, we have a unique window of opportunity to deliver a generational change. Solutions exist and affordable, safe, effective and sustainable approaches and technologies are available. They just need to be prioritized and scaled up.

The Deputy Secretary-General has committed to energize action on many levels. He is calling on all actors to do their part. Renewed commitment from national and local governments to end open defecation by 2025 is required, with concrete plans and measurable milestones. Countries that have made such commitments need to be supported to achieve results and report on progress. The key to this undertaking is to ultimately focus on generating action at the community level. It aims to engage community leaders, schools, local institutions and citizens. But it also requires support from government leaders and international organizations. Advocacy is essential to break the silence and make this a public issue, and to spotlight commitments and efforts to address this huge problem.

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