



Africa's water and sanitation strides

by

the Prince of Orange, Chair of the United Nations Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation

As Chair of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB), I participate in many global water meetings. We often talk about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – the set of development objectives the world set for itself for 2015 – and in particular how sub-Saharan Africa appears unlikely to meet any of the MDG targets for water and sanitation. It is a sweeping and discouraging assessment. But it also is largely unfair, and sometimes leads to an unjustified sense of pessimism.

Yes, Africa is behind according to the MDG global statistical framework. But we must remember that the MDGs, though invaluable, are standardized, relative indicators. They give a useful view of the state of development, but do not tell the entire story. For example, the MDGs call upon every country to cut in half the percentage of people who lack clean water and safe sanitation. That is a far bigger job for a country that started off with a very high percentage of its people lacking clean water and safe sanitation, and even harder if its population in the meantime is rapidly growing. Both of those factors describe nearly every sub-Saharan African country. But look more closely. By other measures, Africa is making impressive progress on water and sanitation. At least seventeen African countries, for example, are outperforming the global average rate for expanding access to safe sanitation if one looks at their progress as a percentage of their population size. And for water supply, 21 African countries performed at or above the global average. Taking water and sanitation coverage together, almost a third of African countries are performing better than the global average. Although this is reflected in the UNICEF/WHO Joint Monitoring Programme coverage data, it has not been adequately reflected in global publications, meetings or official reports on MDG progress.

Africa *is* making tremendous efforts to improve water and sanitation coverage, efforts which need to be recognized, supported and replicated. Is there room for complacency? Of course not. Two-thirds of African countries are performing below the global average and much more progress is necessary. Too many children still die from diarrhea complications resulting from unsafe sanitation. Too many girls and women spend hours a day carrying water for their families. But what the one-third of African countries outperforming the global average tells us is that many solutions, effective approaches and good practices for water and sanitation coverage exist on this continent. Africans can learn a lot from each other.

Without clean water and safe sanitation, real human and economic development is not possible. African countries recognized this when they articulated their commitment during the 2008 African Union Summit in the Sharm el-Sheikh Declaration for Accelerating the Achievement of Water and Sanitation Goals in Africa. I will be in Johannesburg, South Africa for the second Africa Water Week (Nov. 9 – 13) where governments, civil society organizations and international agencies are gathering to carry forward the Sharm el-Sheikh Declaration. Too many times, leaders make



United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation

declarations, but there is no follow-up. Not so this time. There is real effort to keep this Declaration alive and to turn pessimism into optimism. Let us use this momentum to accelerate progress in bringing water and sanitation to the people of Africa for health, dignity and development.