



Global Safe Water: Solving the World's Most Pressing Environmental Health Problem

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For more information contact:

Melanie Nakagawa
mnakagawa@nrdc.org

Susan Egan-Keane
skeane@nrdc.org

Jacob Scherr
jscherr@nrdc.org

or call 202-289-6868



www.nrdc.org/policy

For the 1 billion people without it, safe water is the world's most pressing problem. Lack of safe drinking water and sanitation is the single largest cause of illness in the world, contributing to the death of 5 million people a year and about 5,000 children every day.¹ The solutions to this global public health crisis are well-known and cost-effective, yet the problem is growing. Recognizing the urgency of the crisis, in 2005 the United States passed landmark legislation to address the need for affordable and equitable access to safe water and sanitation. But Congress failed to designate any funds to implement the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act. This year, NRDC is calling on Congress to secure funding for the act.

Over the past 150 years, advances in potable, treated water effectively eradicated cholera, typhoid, and other waterborne disease from the United States and other developed nations, saving more lives than any other medical or public health effort.

Yet 1 billion people lack access to water and 2.6 billion people—two in five people in the world—don't have access to improved sanitation, defined as a simple pit latrine or better. More than half of these people live in India and China. The children of these countries are most affected by

the lack of water treatment and decent sanitation—90 percent of deaths from diarrhoeal diseases are children younger than five because children lack effective immune response to waterborne pathogens and toxins.²

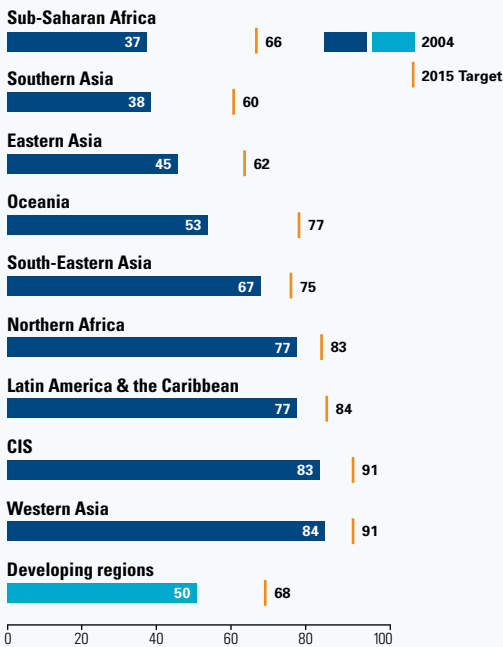
Microbiological contamination is the primary source of waterborne diseases around the world, but chemical contamination—including pesticide runoff, dumped industrial waste, and naturally occurring arsenic in well water—poisons millions of people in Bangladesh, India, China, Nepal, and parts of South America.

Global Safe Water

The solutions are as straight-forward as improving sanitation, protecting water supplies, and treating drinking water. Where community treatment is not feasible, household water treatment options include boiling, solar treatment, chlorination, and filtration.

With half of developing country populations still lacking basic sanitation, the world is unlikely to reach its target

Proportion of population using improved sanitation for 2004 (Percentage)



Between 1990 and 2004, sanitation coverage in the developing world increased from 35 to 50 percent. This meant that 1.2 billion people gained access to sanitation during this period. Another 300 million people should have been served, however, to keep the world on track towards the 2015 target.

Source: United Nations, The Millennium Development Goals Report 2006

International Efforts to Secure Safe Water by 2015

Access to safe drinking water is included in the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious effort to reduce extreme global poverty by 2015. In 2000, member nations vowed to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. If the goal is met, the UN estimates that the health-related costs avoided would be \$7.3 billion per year and the annual global value of adult working days gained would rise to almost \$750 million.³

In addition, clean water and access to sanitation are critical to achieving broader development objectives, from eradicating poverty to promoting girls' education. Millions of hours of productivity are lost because of illness from waterborne diseases while women and girls often spend hours walking to fetch water for their families.

Lack of access to safe water and sanitation is one of the most poorly addressed environmental problems in the world today.

The UN estimates that installing water pipes in homes and latrines closer to home would yield an annual time savings of nearly \$64 billion.⁴

Some progress has been made—between 1990 and 2004, according to the UN, sanitation coverage in the developing world increased from 35 to 50 percent. But a lack of political will continues to hamper international efforts to address the problem. Without sustained involvement and commitment from donor countries and countries receiving aid, an effective assistance plan will be difficult to achieve and the world is unlikely to reach the target.

U.S. Steps to Secure Safe Water by 2015

In 2005, Congress passed the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, which made the provision of safe water and sanitation a cornerstone of U.S. foreign assistance by integrating water and sanitation into all U.S. development programs. The act requires the Secretary of State to develop a strategy to expand access to clean water for millions of people in the developing world to meet the UN's 2015 target. But Congress has yet to designate any funds to implement the act, effectively crippling it.

A Call for Congressional Action

NRDC and other organizations are calling on Congress to fully fund the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act in 2007. The act presents an opportunity for the United States to not only to engage international organizations in targeting the places of greatest need, but also to provide permanent solutions to one of the world's worst environmental health problems. Safe drinking water is an essential step for human health and economic development. With simple sanitation improvements and basic water treatment and delivery, the world's largest environmental health crisis can be resolved in the next decade.

1,2 World Health Organization and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation, *Water for Life: Making It Happen*, 2005, http://www.unicef.org/wes/files/JMP_2005.pdf.

3,4 UN Millennium Task Force on Water and Sanitation, Final Report, Abridged Edition pg. 16, *Health, Dignity, and Development: What Will It Take?*