

Water and Sanitation Fact Sheet

Lack of safe water and sanitation is the world's single largest cause of illness. In 2002, 42 percent of households had no toilets, and one in six people had no access to safe water.

The toll on children is especially high. About 4,500 children die each day from unsafe water and lack of basic sanitation facilities. Countless others suffer from poor health, diminished productivity and missed opportunities for education.

The young and the old are particularly vulnerable. Over 90 percent of deaths from diarrhea-related diseases due to unsafe water and sanitation in the developing world occur in children below 5 years old.

The poor are especially hard hit. A child born in Europe or the United States is 520 times less likely to die from diarrhea-related disease than an infant in sub-Saharan Africa, where only 36 percent of the population can access hygienic sanitation.

Urban-rural disparities are striking. In 2002, only 37 percent of rural inhabitants had access to basic toilets, against 81 percent of urban dwellers. The disparities were greatest in Latin America and the Caribbean, with a difference of 40 percentage points between rural and urban populations.

Women and girls are the “water haulers” of the world. On average, women and girls in developing countries walk 6 kilometers a day, carrying 20 liters of water, greatly reducing the time they have for other productive work or for girls to attend school.

Waterborne illnesses keep children out of school. A study of Jamaican students aged 9-12 found that children suffering from trichuriasis (a water-borne disease) were in classes only half as much as their uninfected peers. And when schools lack toilets, girls will often not attend.

Improving household drinking water can reduce diarrhea episodes by as much as 39 percent; on average, improvements to household sanitation facilities can reduce sickness from diarrhea by almost a third. Almost half of the nearly 2 million deaths from diarrhea each year could be prevented through an understanding of basic hygiene.

The world is on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal on water but not sanitation. With the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, all regions should meet their water targets. Under current rates of progress, the world will miss the sanitation target by more than half a billion people.

The MDGS are affordable and cost-effective. Meeting the MDG targets on water and sanitation would cost approximately an additional US\$11.3 billion each year. A cost-benefit analysis undertaken by the World Health Organization found that every \$1 invested in achieving the Millennium Development targets on water and sanitation would yield returns between \$3 and \$34, depending on the region.