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Keeping water fresh

Poor sanitation pollutes both drinking water and the environment.

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The Global Goals are an opportunity to highlight how little progress has been made and the huge amount of resources and political will will be required to achieve universal access.

For sanitation, the situation is far worse. The needle is hardly moving in improving it for the 2.3 billion people that lack even basic service. As many as 109 countries, including ones from every region of the world, are not on track to achieve universal basic sanitation by 2030. Twenty countries are even going backwards, because their incredibly slow progress is being outpaced by population growth. An astounding 61 per cent of the world’s population – nearly 4.5 billion people – lack safely managed sanitation services.

Almost one tenth of the total burden of disease worldwide is associated with unsafe drinking water, sanitation, hygiene, and water resource management. About 842,000 deaths occur annually from diarrhoea and the World Health Organization states that an important share of diseases like malnutrition, intestinal nematode infections, lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, schistosomiasis, and malaria could be prevented if people had sufficient water quality and quantity and clean sanitation facilities – and if they practiced safe hygiene and water resource management.

One reason for the slow progress on sanitation is that an inordinate amount of time and resources have been spent in building sewerage systems in developing countries. The consequences have been that relatively few people tend to benefit, leaving vast majorities without any services at all. Treatment facilities are high tech and not properly maintained, while rural populations tend to be forgotten entirely. So, most faecal waste and sewage in developing countries finds its way into neighborhoods, drainage and water, causing sickness and pollution.

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Guaranteeing safely managed clean water and sanitation for everyone remains one of the biggest global challenges that are solvable in our lifetimes. But we must prioritize collaboration and monitoring.

The Sustainable Development Goals are an important call to action for governments, the private sector and households/consumers to take a more active role in ensuring these basic services are put in place. Without safely managed clean water and sanitation, public health cannot be guaranteed, children will continue to die from diarrhoea and suffer from stunting and improper cognitive development – and countries will not reach their full economic potential. This is an imperative not only for households but for institutions like schools and health care facilities, and in markets, bus depots, and the workplace.

Recent data from the World Health Organization states that an important share of diseases like malnutrition, intestinal nematode infections, lymphatic filariasis, trachoma, schistosomiasis, and malaria could be prevented if people had sufficient water quality and quantity and clean sanitation facilities – and if they practiced safe hygiene and water resource management.

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The water and sanitation challenge is a gauge for progress on equity and human dignity worldwide. These services are a human right and it is the responsibility of governments to ensure they are delivered in partnership with the private sector, civil society and consumers.

This includes specifically focusing on how those services include the poor, disenfranchised and marginalized – especially women and girls and people living with disabilities – while working with the private sector and civil society to ensure they are delivered sustainably. Disaggregating national data to look at water and sanitation access by income level or region reveals vast disparities that must be resolved through targeted, inclusive interventions. Governments and the global community must hold themselves accountable by monitoring progress.

The Sustainable Development Goals have offered a new opportunity to shed light on how little progress has been made and to highlight the huge amount of human and financial resources and political will that will be required to achieve universal access to safely managed water and sanitation. The goals the world has set will only be met if governments, civil society and the private sector acknowledge their dependence on each other and learn to collaborate.