

WOMEN, WATER AND HYGIENE ARE KEY TO CHANGE IN AFRICA

Services for Women & Girls Must Be Priority for Water and Sanitation

Eirah Gorre-Dale
Special Representative of the
Water Supply and Sanitation
Collaborative Council (WSSCC)
to the United Nations
Email: gorre-dale@un.org

NEW YORK, 14 September 2005 - Women, water and basic hygiene are the key to creating lasting change in Africa, but national water and sanitation plans are still leaving women out, leaders in development said today.

UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman joined other prominent women, including Hilde Frafjord Johnson, Norway's Minister for International Development, to call for more attention and funds to help the millions of African women and girls suffering disproportionately for lack of these basic services.

"Unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene habits play a major role in child mortality," said UNICEF Executive Director Ann M. Veneman. "Bringing basic services to Africa's women and girls could transform their lives and boost child survival in the region."

Veneman said she is joining Minister Johnson and Minister Maria Mutagamba, Uganda's Minister of State for Water, in the Women Leaders for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) initiative. Launched last year by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), Women Leaders in WASH helps governments to link women with sanitation and hygiene programmes, and supports the UNICEF drive to put safe water and basic sanitation into all primary schools by 2015. The group is meeting at UNICEF today to set out a plan of action for Africa.

Lack of safe water and sanitation remains one of the world's most urgent health issues. Some 1.1 billion people worldwide still lack safe water and 2.6 billion have no sanitation, according to a UNICEF and World Health Organization 2005 report Water for Life.

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region likely to miss Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets on both safe water and basic sanitation, unless the world acts quickly to turn this around. MDG 7 calls on countries to reduce by half the number of people living without these basic services. But despite good progress in some countries, currently only 58 per cent of Africans live within 30 minutes walk of an improved water source and only 36 percent have even a basic toilet.

The consequences are particularly severe for African women and children, condemning millions to a life of illness, lost opportunities and virtual slavery.

In rural Africa, 19 per cent of women spend more than one hour on each trip to fetch water, an exhausting and often dangerous chore that robs them of the chance to work and learn. Women without toilets are forced to defecate in the open, risking their dignity and personal safety. Education suffers too: more than half of all girls who drop out of primary school do so for lack of separate toilets and easy access to safe water.

Unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene habits play a major role in Africa's high child mortality rate. Diarrhoea is the third-biggest child killer in Africa after pneumonia and malaria, accounting for 701,000 child deaths out of 4.4 million on the continent every year. It also leaves millions of children with a legacy of chronic malnutrition, the underlying cause of over half of all child mortality. The burden of caring for sick relatives inevitably falls to women and girls, keeping them at home and shutting them out of economic development.

Bringing relief to women and girls will result in better services for all and benefit entire communities, said Minister Johnson and Minister Mutagamba.

"Women can be key agents of change if they are empowered and involved," said Minister Johnson. "Since they are the primary victims of unsafe water and poor sanitation, we must start with them if we are to liberate Africa from cycles of illness, child mortality and low productivity."

"In Uganda, we saw how rapidly school attendance can rise and illness fall when schools have safe water and separate toilets for boys and girls," said Minister Mutagamba. "There is no excuse not to put these effective and sustainable interventions into practice everywhere."

Veneman, Johnson and Mutagamba hailed the great progress made by many poor countries as proof that water and sanitation goals are achievable everywhere. They called on Millennium Summit leaders to commit to a strong action plan for the next decade.

For more information, please contact:

Claire Hajaj, UNICEF New York, +1 212 326 7566, chajaj@unicef.org
UNICEF House, 3 UN Plaza, New York, N.Y. 10017; www.unicef.org

Eirah Gorre-Dale, WSSCC, +1 212 963 6003, gorre-dale@un.org
WHO Office at the United Nations, 2 UN Plaza, DC2-973, New York, N.Y.
10017; www.wsscc.org

Note to editors: there will be a press conference on the water and sanitation crisis in Africa at 10:00 am, Wednesday 14 September at the UN Secretariat, room 226. Speakers will be UNICEF Water and Sanitation Chief Vanessa Tobin, Minister Johnson and Minister Mutagamba.

Note to broadcasters: video footage is available from Video on Demand at www.unicef.org