



Water Problems in Latin America

77 million people lack access to safe water: The region has made tremendous advances in recent decades. The percentage of people in Latin America and the Caribbean with direct access to water has increased from 33 percent of the population in 1960 to 85 percent by 2000. This still leaves 77 million people without a water connection in their homes – 51 million rural residents and 26 million urban ones.

100 million people lack access to sanitation: Between 1960 and 2000, the percentage of people in Latin American and the Caribbean connected to sanitation services grew from 14 percent of 49 percent of the population. This still leaves an estimated 256 million people dependent on latrines and septic tanks only, and 100 million people with absolutely no access to any safe sanitation.

Lack of treatment of sanitation wastes: Sewage from less than 14 percent of houses is treated at sanitation plants, greatly increasing the chances of ecological damages “down the line,” as the untreated sewage enters rivers, lakes, underground aquifers and oceans.

Large water pricing inequality: In the year 2000, statistics show that poor people paid between 1.5 and 2.8 times more for their water than non-poor families, in real terms, and a much higher percentage of their income for water. The quality of the water received by the poor was also much worse, increasing the danger that the diarrheal diseases that could kill them would hit their children.

Major financial constraints in rich, middle income and poor Western Hemispheric nations alike restrict the abilities of national and local governments to address all of their water needs simultaneously, forcing hard choices that must involve “stakeholders,” that is, those who use the water for drinking, sanitation, industry and agriculture. Some alternatives have included the establishment of solidarity funds, public-private partnerships, community participation and other alternative financial schemes.

Ground water: Major aquifers in the western United States, Mexico and in South America are being threatened by overexploitation and pollution. In South America, 40-60 percent of water comes from aquifers that are facing ever-growing pollution from over-mining and agriculture. In Mexico, 102 of the nation's 653 aquifers are overused, the main source of water for 65 percent of the population. In some areas, farmers have had to switch from water-intensive cotton to less profitable grain crops used to feed cattle, because the aquifers no longer produced sufficient water to grow cotton.

Lakes and River Pollution – Many major lakes and river basins from North to South America are under great strain from growing populations and decades of agricultural and industrial run-off, including the Great Lakes, Lake Chapala in Mexico,

Hurricanes and the effects of El Niño: In recent decades, population growth has been huge in coastal regions that lie in the path of hurricanes, greatly increasing the danger of widespread deaths and economic losses. Hurricane Mitch killed 9,000 people in Central America in 1998, caused \$6 billion in damages and temporarily dislocated 75 percent of the Honduran population. One political leader said that this single storm destroyed 75 years of economic progress. The periodic effects of changes in the Pacific ocean current off the coast of South America, known as El Niño, alternately brings large scale droughts and more severe storms to both North America and South America that are ever more highly populated. If climatic change scenarios develop, as some scientists believe, hurricanes will become even more powerful and damaging.

Transboundary Issues: Transboundary water issues are requiring management models that can provide rational water allocation at the basin level while respecting states sovereignty. Many river basins are shared throughout the Americas – between Canada and the United States, between Mexico and the United States, among Central American states, and among Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. Wealthy countries like Canada and the United States have not yet developed a plan to clean up the Great Lakes, which suffer from contaminated sediment from decades of industrial and agricultural run-off that is acting as a toxin in fish and other food supplies, while more than 160 non-native species have entered the water system, such as the sea lamprey and zebra mussel, that are creating havoc with native species. At the same time important agreements in the Plata Basin (shared by Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay) have allowed important water resources development in the region, notably hydropower and navigation.

Wealth Does Not Mean Clean Water: North American regions do not escape water problems because of their status among the wealthier nations. For example, in the continental United States, 21

percent of watersheds have serious water quality problems and 36 percent of watersheds have moderate water quality problems. More than two-thirds of all residents of the United States – 218 million people -- live within 10 miles of a polluted lake, river, stream or coastal area.