

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF welcomes International Year of Sanitation 2008

Children and women comprise 90 per cent of those affected

New York - January 2, 2008 .– UNICEF today officially welcomed the first day of the International Year of Sanitation 2008. The international year aims to highlight the need for urgent action on behalf of the more than 40 per cent of the world's population who continue to live without improved sanitation.

Lack of proper sanitation contributes to the deaths of thousands of women and children every day from largely preventable causes, including diarrhoeal diseases. Though more than 1.2 billion people worldwide have gained access to improved sanitation between 1990 and 2004, an estimated 2.6 billion people -- including 980 million children -- have yet to be reached. This is one of the single biggest development challenges facing the world today.

The International Year of Sanitation 2008 was established by the United Nations General Assembly in December 2006 to accelerate progress towards meeting the Millennium Development Goal target of reducing by half the proportion of people living without access to improved sanitation by 2015. In addition, progress on sanitation will contribute to the achievement of all the Millennium Development Goals.

Improved sanitation includes clean, safe toilets, wastewater management and hygiene promotion, all of which prevent the transfer of pathogens in human excreta. When not treated safely, it adversely impacts health, often deprives children of getting an education, and impedes social and economic development. Lack of improved sanitation in schools is an important underlying factor in absenteeism and poor classroom performance due to illness, low enrolment and early school dropout, especially for girls whose parents may remove them from the education system when they start menstruating. Lack of toilets exposes women and girls to violence and abuse as some are only able to defecate only after nightfall and in secluded areas. Proper sanitation, including handwashing with soap, averts the spread of diarrhoeal disease, which is the second biggest killer of children under five. Improving sanitation leads to improved health, dignity, social and economic development, protects the environment and helps people break the cycle of poverty.

The year will include major regional conferences on sanitation to share best practices and help accelerate progress, including those that focus on school sanitation. It will also help encourage public and private partnerships, to help tap into the comparative strengths of each sector, advocate and raise awareness on sanitation, leverage additional funding, and develop country-level plans of action.

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Additionally, many activities and events are planned both inside and outside the UN system surrounding Sanitation and Hygiene Week (15-21 March) and World Water Day (22 March). One such significant event is UN-Water's observance of World Water Day (this year to be celebrated as World Sanitation Day) taking place in Geneva on 14 March and co-organized by UNICEF, WHO and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC).

About UNICEF

UNICEF is on the ground in 150 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.

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