

## **Water For Life – An International Decade Of Action**

### **A silent emergency**

Water is fundamental to human life, health and dignity. But over one billion people worldwide struggle daily without the bare minimum of safe water they need to survive. In many communities, families are forced by poverty and scarcity to rely on unsafe sources of water like ponds, open wells or street vendors. Many have to walk miles each day to collect enough water to drink, cook and wash.

The impact of this deprivation on children is particularly catastrophic. 4000 children die every day from waterborne diseases spread by poor sanitation and lack of basic hygiene awareness. Repeated episodes of diarrhoea leave millions more with a permanent legacy of malnourishment and ill-health. With their physical and intellectual development eroded, many will find school and learning impossible.

These are the factors that perpetuate poverty, particularly in poor rural communities.

### **A decade for action**

The International Decade of Action on Water For Life is an international drive to reverse this toll and meet development targets through bringing safe water, basic sanitation and hygiene education to families by 2015. The Decade is being launched by the United Nations Secretary-General at the 13<sup>th</sup> UN Commission for Sustainable Development.

Governments, development agencies, the private sector and civil society are united around this Decade because:

- Access to safe water underpins all progress for poor communities. It can decrease child mortality and keep children healthy enough to learn – which profoundly impacts their chances of improving their life circumstances. Investing in safe water, basic sanitation and hygiene education is one of the smartest, surest investments in children – and therefore in a sustainably better future.
- Reaching all eight of the Millennium Development Goals depends on reaching Goal Seven, which calls for a reduction by half in the proportion of people living without access to safe water and basic sanitation.
- We only have ten years to act! And the situation is urgent. Despite great efforts in many countries, more than one fifth of all children are still deprived of safe water. And gains in bringing safe water to families are being washed away by the appalling lack of progress on basic sanitation. One third of the world's population – 2.6 billion people - are without access to a basic latrine.

### **UNICEF's promise**

Over the next ten years UNICEF will link with governments, development agencies, private sector and civil society to make safe water, sanitation and hygiene education the foundation of development efforts. Working with poor communities in over 90 countries, UNICEF will focus on improving the basic water supply and sanitation

services in homes and schools, promoting hygiene awareness and strengthening national policies to protect the poorest children.

Bringing water and sanitation to schools is a particular UNICEF priority because it improves children's lives in a multitude of ways. It means more children in the classroom who are healthy and able to learn. It enables children to pass on lifesaving hygiene lessons like handwashing to their families, improving the health of entire communities. It opens the classroom door to girls, who are too often kept out by lack of separate latrines. Although this one simple intervention could profoundly boost child survival, education, equality and poverty reduction efforts, over half of all schools in developing countries lack these essentials.

As part of its plan of action for the decade, UNICEF is calling for:

1. A global, united approach. Only by pooling our resources and working together at every level can we expect to have an impact in the poorest communities.
2. A drive for capacity-building at the local level. Sustainability depends on the ability of local people and institutions to maintain water supplies and good hygiene practises, particularly in isolated rural communities.
3. More focus on sanitation and hygiene education. Children cannot reap the full benefits of safe water if they are living in environments that spread disease and discourage cleanliness.

In emergency situations, UNICEF will continue to lead the relief efforts of United Nations and non-governmental organizations to bring safe water and sanitation to families.