Key UN rights body urges States to do more to ensure safe, affordable sanitation

People living in the streets without access to adequate sanitation

19 November 2010 – Highlighting some of the massive sanitation problems that prevail across the globe, a key United Nations rights body today called on States to do more to ensure safe, hygienic and proper access to sanitation.

In a statement adopted to coincide with World Toilet Day, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights said that sanitation is a human right, and an essential component of the right to an adequate standard of living.

Around 2.6 billion people worldwide have no access to adequate sanitation with over a billion continuing to practise open defecation. The Geneva-based Committee said that recent estimates showed the numbers are growing, with a further 100 million estimated to have missed out on sanitation between 2006 and 2008.

In 2002, a target for sanitation development was added to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the set of anti-poverty targets world leaders have pledged to achieve by 2015.

Although increased access to sanitation was considered fundamentally as important as other MDG targets, the Committee noted that sanitation "is one of the most off-track targets of the Millennium Development Goals," despite affecting so many people.

The UN's Independent Expert on water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, welcomed the statement.

"For too long, sanitation has been neglected and the attention devoted to the issue by the Committee is a signal that times are changing," she said.

The Committee pointed out that the world's poor suffer disproportionately from bad sanitation. The status of diarrhoea as the second biggest cause of death of children under five years old is directly attributable to the fact that as much as 80 per cent of wastewater goes untreated in developing countries, it noted.

News Tracker: past stories on this issue

New UN report reveals link between poverty and poor health in urban areas