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Hailing drive to reinvent the toilet, UN expert warns technology is not enough



Constructing a toilet in Cambodia

22 July 2011 –

A United Nations human rights expert today welcomed a multimillion dollar grant offered by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation aimed at “reinventing the toilet” to save water and transform human waste into energy and fertiliser, but warned it will take more than new technology to overcome the world’s sanitation problems.

Catarina de Albuquerque, the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to water and sanitation, [said](#):
“New technology alone is not enough to overcome the sanitation and water crisis we face.

Investments in software solutions, like awareness rising among the people on the vital importance of sanitation, are crucial to make sure the hardware solutions are actually used.”

Earlier this week the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation announced \$42 million in grants “to spur innovations in the capture and storage of waste, as well as its processing into reusable energy, fertilizer, and fresh water,” according to the foundation’s website.

Ms. De Albuquerque said: “I urge all countries which face challenges in ensuring access to sanitation for the whole population, to associate the creation of hardware solutions with awareness raising and education activities, on hygiene promotion, including hand washing, as well as on the crucial importance of safe sanitation as a means to decrease child mortality and improve health conditions.”

The Special Rapporteur said that even though the primary responsibility for the realization of human rights lies with States, support by other parties is always welcome.

“If we combine the desperate situation the world is facing concerning sanitation with the growing water crisis, the Gates’ initiative proves to be even more valuable,” she said. “It aims at coming up with a solution for sanitation, while avoiding wasting precious water flushing toilets.”

“Sanitation is a human right which has been recognized as such by the UN General Assembly precisely one year ago, and through this resolution governments have committed to adopt measures in order to ensure that this right becomes a reality for all,” Ms. de Albuquerque said. “Sanitation, as well as water, must hence be safe, culturally acceptable, affordable, accessible and available to all without discrimination.”

Ms. de Albuquerque is an independent, unpaid specialist reporting to the Human Rights Council in Geneva.

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