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On World Water Day, UN calls for greater investment in providing clean water for all



South Africa's Table Mountain is floodlit in blue to mark World Water Day 2011 held in Cape Town

22 March 2011 – [Secretary-General](#) Ban Ki-moon today urged governments to recognize that the water crisis facing many urban areas is the result of weak policies and poor management rather than scarcity, noting that the problem calls for increased investment in water and sanitation services.

“Let us also pledge to reverse the alarming decline in pro-poor investment in water and sanitation,” Mr. Ban said in a [message](#) to mark World Water Day, whose theme this year is ‘Water for Cities’.

“And let us reaffirm our commitment to ending the plight of the more than 800 million people who, in a world of plenty, still do not have the safe drinking water or sanitation they need for a life in dignity and good health,” he said.

The Secretary-General pointed out that over the past decade, the number of urban dwellers who lack access to a water tap in their home or immediate vicinity has risen by an estimated 114 million, while the number of those who lack access to the most basic sanitation facilities has risen by 134 million. The 20 per cent increase has had a hugely detrimental impact on human health and on economic productivity, he said.

“In many countries, girls are forced to drop out of school owing to a lack of sanitation facilities, and women are harassed or assaulted when carrying water or visiting a public toilet.

“Moreover, the poorest and most vulnerable members of society often have little choice but to buy water from informal vendors at prices estimated to be 20 to 100 per cent higher than that of their richer neighbours, who receive piped city water in their homes. This is not just unsustainable; it is unacceptable,” the Secretary-General stressed.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization ([FAO](#)), meanwhile, highlighted the need for new and innovative approaches to ensuring safe and adequate water for city dwellers in developing countries.

“Within the next 20 years, 60 per cent of the world’s population will live in cities, with most urban expansion taking place in the developing world. Ensuring access to nutritious, affordable food for the poorer of these city-dwellers is emerging as a real challenge,” said Alexander Mueller, FAO Assistant Director-General for Natural Resources.

He called for non-conventional alternatives for ensuring clean water is available, pointing out that rainwater harvesting in cities holds great potential for urban agriculture, but the method is relatively untapped.

One other key issue, according to FAO, is how to safely and sustainably scale up agriculture in urban and urban fringe areas and increase its contribution to meeting the needs of urban populations, while simultaneously coping with resource bottlenecks.

Shortages of irrigation water inside and around cities, along with rising interest in urban farming, has highlighted the potential for water reuse in urban environments.

“Right now, farmers and cities are competing for water. Cities are using water then putting it back out, polluting the environment. It would make so much more sense if more of the water used in the cities was then cleaned and reused in agriculture,” said Javier Mateo-Sagasta, a specialist with FAO’s Water Unit.

Doing so would reduce water scarcity and free up more of the resource for food producers in urban and urban fringe areas, who would not only spend less on acquiring water, but also on buying fertilizers, since treated wastewater is rich in nutrients, he added.

The UN independent experts on water and sanitation, extreme poverty and housing, for their part, emphasized that water and sanitation are human rights which must be guaranteed for all people without discrimination, calling for solutions to ensure that slum dwellers and residents of informal settlements have safe water and decent sanitation facilities.

“With ever increasing numbers of people living in cities today, lack of access to safe and affordable water and sanitation in urban contexts is a pressing concern,” Catarina de Albuquerque, the independent expert on water and sanitation, Magdalena Sepúlveda, the independent expert on extreme poverty, and Raquel Rolnik, the Special Rapporteur on housing, said in a joint statement.

“Time and again, we see that those without access to water and sanitation are also those who are marginalized, excluded or discriminated against. Their inadequate access to safe water and sanitation is not simply an unfortunate by-product of their poverty but rather a result of political decisions to exclude them and to de-legitimize their existence, which perpetuates their poverty.”

They also underlined the fact that poor people often pay more to access essential services such as water and sanitation.

Citing UN studies, they noted that someone living in an informal settlement in Nairobi, the Kenyan capital, pays five to seven times more for a litre of water than an average North American citizen.

“With no legal connections to the formal water and sanitation network, people living in poverty often buy water of dubious quality from informal vendors, or use dirty public latrines that are not properly managed – however, without these inferior services, millions would have no access to water and sanitation at all,” they noted.

In Cyprus, the UN-backed Technical Committee on Environment launched an exhibition showcasing a variety of water-saving technologies aiming to raise awareness about the many water management challenges faced by the Mediterranean island State, and methods to address them.

Alexander Downer, the Special Adviser of the Secretary-General on Cyprus, urged the two communities in the divided island to work together to find solutions for the water shortages in the drought-prone country. “The environment does not respect politics. It makes a lot of sense for the two communities to get together in bi-communal projects of this kind in order to address the sorts of problems we have in Cyprus,” he said.