

Key to fighting world poverty: toilets, report says

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Courtesy U.N. University and World Science staff

Simply installing toilets where needed throughout the world and ensuring safe water supplies would do more to end crippling poverty and improve world health than any other possible measure, according to a new report.

The analysis released Oct. 19 by the Tokyo-based United Nations University said better water and sanitation reduces poverty in three ways: through new opportunities for local entrepreneurs, savings for the public health sector, and increased individual productivity in contributing to economies.

The organization also calls on the world's research community to help fill major knowledge gaps that hamper progress in addressing the twin global scourges of unsafe water and poor sanitation.

Information gaps include such seemingly obvious measures as common definitions and worldwide maps to identify communities most vulnerable to health-related problems as a result of poor access to sanitation and safe water, the report said.

The university also called for creation of a "tool-box" to help policy-makers choose between available options in local circumstances.

"Water problems, caused largely by an appalling absence of adequate toilets in many places, contribute tremendously to some of the world's most punishing problems, foremost among them the inter-related afflictions of poor health and chronic poverty," said Zafar Adeel, Director of the U.N. University's Canadian-based International Network on Water, Environment and Health.

"It is astonishing that, despite all the attention these issues have received over decades, the world has not even properly mapped water and sanitation problems nor agreed on such terms as 'safe,' or 'adequate,' or 'accessible' or 'affordable,' all of which are in daily use by officials and policy-makers."

U.N. University, an outgrowth of the U.N., is an international community of scholars researching global problems, including the use of science and technology to advance human welfare.