

# WATER FACTS



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## Global Safe Water: Solving the World's Most Pressing Environmental Health Problem

For the nearly one billion people who don't have access to it, clean water is the world's most pressing problem. Lack of safe drinking water and sanitation is the single largest cause of illness in the world, contributing to the deaths of 2 million people a year, the majority of which are children.<sup>1</sup> The solutions to this global public health crisis are well-known and cost-effective, yet more than 780 million people are without clean drinking water, and approximately 2.5 billion lack adequate sanitation.<sup>2</sup> In 2005, recognizing the urgency of the crisis, the United States passed the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, landmark legislation designed to address the need for global affordable and equitable access to safe water and sanitation. But Congress failed to fully fund the Act, and as of February 2012, the Administration has not released the comprehensive water strategy required by the law. A critical step towards alleviating the global water and sanitation crisis is for the U.S. Government to fully fund and implement the Water for the Poor Act.

In the past 150 years, advances in potable, treated water have effectively eradicated cholera, typhoid, and other waterborne diseases in the United States and other developed nations, saving more lives than any other medical or public health initiative.

Yet, nearly eight hundred million people do not have access to safe water, and two and a half billion people—more than one-third of the people on this planet—lack access to adequate sanitation, which is defined as a simple pit latrine or better. Because children do not have effective immune responses to some waterborne pathogens and toxins, they are most affected by this lack of clean water and decent sanitation; the majority of deaths from diarrheal diseases are in children younger than five.

Microbiological contamination is the primary source of waterborne diseases around the world, but chemical contamination—including pesticide runoff, dumped industrial waste and naturally-occurring arsenic in well water—poisons millions around the globe, in Bangladesh, India, China, Nepal, and parts of South America, among other regions.

The solutions are as straight-forward as improving sanitation, protecting water supplies, and treating drinking water. Where community water treatment is not feasible,

household options include boiling, solar treatment, chlorination, and filtration. Sanitation improvements include decreasing the practice of open defecation by increasing access to sanitary latrines.

### SAFE DRINKING WATER AND SANITATION SAVE LIVES, ERADICATE POVERTY, PROMOTE EDUCATION, AND BENEFIT THE ECONOMY


Access to safe drinking water is part of the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals, an ambitious effort to reduce extreme global poverty by 2015. In 2000, member nations vowed to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. The UN Children's Fund and World Health Organization announced recently that the world has surpassed the UN Millennium Goal for safe water, but is not on track to meet the goal of improved sanitation for 75 percent of the world.<sup>3</sup>

Clean water and access to sanitation are critical to achieving broader development objectives, from eradicating poverty to promoting education for girls. Millions of hours



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of productivity are lost due to illnesses from waterborne diseases, and women and girls often spend hours walking to fetch water for their families. The UN estimates that installing water pipes in homes and latrines closer to home would yield an annual time savings of nearly \$64 billion for these individuals.<sup>4</sup>

According to the UN, between 1990 and 2010, access to safe drinking water increased by 13 percent—89 percent of the global population now has access to cleaner water sources. Yet 780 million people, nearly a third of whom live in Sub-Saharan Africa, still lack access. Efforts to meet sanitation goals have been less successful; at the current rate of progress, the sanitation target goal will fall short by 8 percent, leaving 2.4 billion people without access to adequate sanitation.<sup>5</sup>

The slow progress is partially due to regional differences (population density, economic factors, and existing infrastructure) along with population growth rates, but the major obstacle to international efforts is a lack of political resolve. Without sustained involvement and commitment from donor countries and those receiving aid, lasting solutions will not be implemented, and the world will fail to reach the stated target.

## U.S. LEADERSHIP IS NEEDED FOR GLOBAL PROGRESS ON WATER AND SANITATION

The 2005 Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act made the provision of safe water and sanitation a cornerstone of U.S. foreign assistance by integrating water and sanitation into all U.S. development programs. Our government is paying more attention to this issue; in speeches on World Water Day 2010 and 2011, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton made major commitments to advance access to water. The Act requires the State Department—in coordination with USAID and other government agencies—to develop a strategy to expand access to clean water for millions of people in the developing world to meet the UN's 2015 target. More than six years later, however, the State Department has not yet developed a final strategy, and although funding for clean water and sanitation from Congress increased to approximately \$300 million a year, efforts to improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation have not been fully funded. The strategy is essential for ensuring that these funds are used efficiently, and that water, sanitation and hygiene are delivered to those who need it the most.

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*"Water is the wellspring of all life on earth."*

—Secretary of State Hillary Clinton,  
World Water Day 2010

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## CONGRESSIONAL ACTION CAN HELP SECURE SAFE WATER FOR COMMUNITIES IN NEED

The Natural Resources Defense Council and other organizations are calling for Congress to fully fund the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, and pass the Senator Paul Simon Water for the World Act—introduced in both the House and the Senate—legislation which would strengthen the Water for the Poor Act. Water for the Poor presents an opportunity for the United States to not only engage international organizations in targeting the places of greatest need, but to provide permanent solutions to this pressing problem. Safe drinking water is vital for human health and economic development. With simple sanitation improvements and basic water treatment and delivery, the world's largest environmental health crisis can be resolved in the next decade.

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Women and children carrying home the unsafe water they collected from their existing unimproved water source. Tigray, Ethiopia.

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. Water Sanitation and Health. Water-related Diseases. Diarrhea. [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/diseases/diarrhoea/en/](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/diseases/diarrhoea/en/). 2011. Accessed March 7, 2012.

<sup>2,3</sup> World Health Organization/United Nations Children's Fund. Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2012 Update. [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/publications/2012/jmp\\_report/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/2012/jmp_report/en/index.html). Last accessed March 9, 2012.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. UN Millennium Task Force on Water and Sanitation. *Health, Dignity, and Development: What Will It Take?* Final Report, Abridged Edition pg. 16. [unmillenniumproject.org/documents/WaterComplete-lowres.pdf](http://unmillenniumproject.org/documents/WaterComplete-lowres.pdf). 2005. Accessed March 7, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> World Health Organization/United Nations Children's Fund. Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: 2012 Update. [http://www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/publications/2012/jmp\\_report/en/index.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/2012/jmp_report/en/index.html). Last accessed March 9, 2012.