



# story

## Water and Poverty: What's the Connection?

**October 9, 2008**—Water is crucial to human life in a countless number of ways. It is important not only for the everyday needs of drinking, washing and cleaning, but also for growing crops to feed the population, for generating power to provide electricity, and for maintaining ecosystems such as wetlands. Overall, it plays a vital role in people's livelihoods, the growth of the economy, and the sustenance and health of all species. Developing and managing the world's water resources has become a major challenge as water demands are constantly growing and shifting.

The lack of safe water and basic sanitation is posing a serious impediment to development and economic growth in many parts of the world. There are many factors behind the water shortage, including poor distribution, bad management, poverty, pollution, climate change, natural disasters, warfare, population growth and urbanization. And mostly, it is people in the world's poorest countries who pay the highest price. This is because unsafe water and poor sanitation lead to unhygienic conditions and disease, and also because the poor often spend hours looking for and fetching safe water. All these negative effects hinder a person's ability to earn a living or get an education, creating a cycle of poverty whose costs are way too high:

- 1.1 billion people lack access to safe water
- 2.6 billion lack access to basic sanitation
- Every year 1.6 million children die from diarrhea and other diseases caused by unclean water and poor sanitation
- The time spent fetching safe water and the toll of environmental degradation from wastewater pollution are costing more than 1.4% of GDP in Bangladesh, 1% in Colombia, and 0.6% in Tunisia

Competing demands for water threaten to overlook the rights of the poor (including small farmers and women) in favor of the more powerful. Also, the tensions over water rights are giving rise to a serious risk of future cross-border conflict in water-stressed regions.

## What's Affecting the World's Water?

### Bad Management

Unfortunately, many countries face major challenges in improving the laws, regulations and institutions required for managing water resources in a better way. According to the United Nations Human Development Report of 2006, "the roots of the crisis in water can be traced to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships, as well as flawed water management policies that exacerbate scarcity." 12% of the world's population uses 85% of its water, and they live in the industrialized world.

### Pollution and Quality Degradation

As populations rise and economies grow, increased pollution is threatening the quality of many lakes, rivers, estuaries and groundwater bodies around the world. This poses serious threats to public health, agricultural and industrial production, ecological functions, and biodiversity. Most water quality problems are caused by pollutants from human activities.

### Climate Change

Climate change will have a critical impact on water resources. For example, rainfall may become more erratic, which will increase both droughts and flooding in many parts of the world, and temperature changes will cause glaciers to shrink. Climate change will also impact coastal groundwater and water quality. All of this will have major implications for sectors that depend on water resources, including urban and rural water supply, agriculture, energy, industry, mining, livestock, fisheries, and the environment. See the impact of a shrinking glacier on one Peruvian community.

### Over-extraction

Groundwater comprises most of the world's accessible freshwater reserves. It supplies millions of farmers and about two billion urban and rural people with their daily water needs. It also supplies water for the environment—through countless springs and wetlands. These days, groundwater is deteriorating in both quality and quantity because of the availability of new and cheap drilling and pumping technologies. Many people, particular in arid parts of the world, are over-pumping groundwater with minimal regulation.

## IT'S A FACT

### HOW DOES WATER RELATE TO THE MDGs?

**Goal 1: Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.** The absence of clean water and adequate sanitation is a major cause of poverty and malnutrition. Improved management of water resources and access to water supply and sanitation boosts countries' economic growth and contributes to poverty reduction.

**Goal 2: Achieve universal primary education.** Some 113 million children of school age—60% girls—do not attend school. Many children, especially girls in rural areas, must help collecting and carrying water for their families instead of going to school.

**Goal 3: Promote gender equality and empower women.** An absence of clean water, poor hygiene and a lack of sanitation affects women and girls who bear the burden of collecting water and of caring for family members suffering from diseases caused by dirty water.

**Goal 4: Reduce child mortality.** Each year, some 10.1 million children die before their fifth birthday, mainly from preventable diseases. Dirty water, poor hygiene and a lack of sanitation account for the most child deaths—about 4,900 each day.

**Goal 5: Improve maternal health.** In developing countries, there is one chance in 48 for mothers to die during childbirth. Dirty water and low hygiene standards cause major risks during and following delivery.

**Goal 6: Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases.** Clean drinking water, adequate sanitation and hygiene are central to preventing the spread or cure of diseases.

**Goal 7: Ensure environmental sustainability.** This goal directly addresses the need for sustainable water resources management, the provision of clean water and adequate sanitation and the reduction of the number of slum dwellers.

**Goal 8: Develop a global partnership for development.** A global partnership provides opportunities to work together to achieve the MDGs, which include halving the proportion of people without access to safe water and sanitation by 2015.

*Source: European Commission Directorate-General for Development*

## What Can Be Done?

### **Better Management**

Both national policies and international cooperation are integral to solving the water problem. It will cost \$10 billion annually to achieve the Millennium Development Goal of halving the proportion of people without access to safe water and sanitation by 2015. According to the UN Human Development Report of 2006, that \$10 billion “represents about eight days of global military spending. In terms of enhancing human security, as distinct from more narrowly defined notions of national security, the conversion of even small amounts of military spending into water and sanitation investments would generate very large returns.”

### **Rainwater Harvesting**

Collecting and storing rainwater is a technique that is proving effective in arid and semi-arid parts of the world, as a way to supplement irrigation for crops, or provide water for drinking, domestic use and livestock.

### **Conservation**

Using less water is the most basic way to help protect the Earth’s water resources. From a municipal perspective, preventing leakages is an important way to avoid waste. And here are a few things you can do on a daily basis:

- Turn off the tap in your bathroom sink while brushing your teeth.
- Take shorter showers. You can save 15 gallons of water per shower by taking a five minute shower instead of 15 minute shower.
- Avoid letting the water run constantly while you’re washing or rinsing dishes.
- Repair dripping faucets.
- Don’t pour cooking water down the drain when there may be another use for it such as watering a plant or garden, or cleaning.
- Operate automatic dishwashers and clothes washers only when they are fully loaded.