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# World Water Development Report says: Political inertia exacerbates water crisis

Faced with "inertia at the leadership level", the global water crisis will reach unprecedented levels in the years ahead with "growing per capita scarcity of water in many parts of the developing world", according to a United Nations report made public. Water resources will steadily decline because of population growth, pollution and expected climate change.

The World Water Development Report - Water for People, Water for Life - is the most comprehensive, up-to-date overview of the state of the resource. Presented on the eve of the Third World Water Forum (Kyoto, Japan, March 16-23), it represents the single most important intellectual contribution to the Forum and the International Year of Freshwater

(<http://www.wateryear2003.org>), which is being led by UNESCO and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

To compile the report, every UN agency and commission dealing with water has for the first time worked jointly to monitor progress against water-related targets in such fields as health, food, ecosystems, cities, industry, energy, risk management, economic evaluation, resource sharing and governance. The 23 UN partners constitute the World Water Assessment Programme (WWAP), whose secretariat is hosted by UNESCO.

"Of all the social and natural crises we humans face, the water crisis is the one that lies at the heart of our survival and that of our planet Earth," says UNESCO Director-General Koichiro Matsuura.

"No region will be spared from the impact of this crisis which touches every facet of life, from the health of children to the ability of nations to secure food for their citizens," says Mr. Matsuura. "Water supplies are falling while the demand is dramatically growing at an unsustainable rate. Over the next 20 years, the average supply of water worldwide per person is expected to drop by a third".

The report will be formally presented to the international community on World Water Day, March 22nd, ([www.worldwater-day.org](http://www.worldwater-day.org)) during the World Water Forum in Kyoto. A series of high-level panel discussions will be organized to discuss the results.

## Chapter highlights: Health and economics

"The 21st century is the century in which the overriding problem is one of water quality and management," says the report. More than 2.2 million people die each year from diseases related to contaminated drinking water and poor sanitation. Water vector-borne diseases also take a heavy toll: about a million people die from malaria each year and more than 200 million suffer from schistosomiasis, known as bilharzias. "Yet these terrible losses, with the waste and suffering they represent, are preventable".

The international community pledged in the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000) and at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, 2002) to have the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. To achieve these targets, an additional 1.5 billion people will require improved access to water supply (by 2015). This means providing



The rural poor - struggling through water crises

services for another 100 million people each year (274,000/day) from 2000 to 2015.

"The challenge for sanitation is more daunting," says the report. An additional 1.9 billion people will need improved access, which means another 125 million each year (342,000/day) from 2000 to 2015. The report explains that cultural factors further complicate the logistical and financial difficulties in providing adequate sanitation.

If the current level of investment were maintained, all regions in the world could reach or come close to both goals, with the exception of sub-Saharan Africa, according to the report. But "in absolute terms, the investment needs of Asia outstrip those of Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean combined". It is estimated that the first interventions would cost about US\$12.6 billion.

Questions remain as to the source of this investment. "Financing the Millennium Development Goals will probably be one of the most important challenges that the international community will have to face over the next 15 years," says the report.

The report outlines debates over water pricing and privatization. "Although it is considered essential to involve the private sector in water resource management," according to the executive summary of the report, "it should be seen as a financial catalyst - not so much as a precondition - for project development (...). Control of the assets and the resource should remain in the hands of the government and users".

The report also insists that any privatization or water-pricing scheme must include mechanisms to protect the poor. "A disturbing fact is that poor people with the most limited access to water supply have to pay significantly more for water." In Delhi (India), for example, vendors charge the poor US\$4.89 per m<sup>3</sup>, while families with piped connections pay just US\$0.01, according to a survey published in the report. In Vientiane (Laos), vendors charge US\$14.68 per m<sup>3</sup>, compared to municipal tariffs of US\$0.11.

## Agriculture

About 25,000 people die every day from hunger, according to

the report. An estimated 815 million people suffer from undernourishment: 777 million in developing countries, 27 million in countries in transition and 11 million in industrialized countries.

"The absolute number of undernourished people is reducing at a much slower rate", says the report, despite the fact that "food production is satisfying the market demand at historically low prices".

The international community has pledged through the Millennium Goals (2000) to halve the proportion of people suffering from hunger by 2015. However, this may not be achieved before 2030 according to new findings presented in the report. Previous estimates did not distinguish between rainfed and irrigated crops. By factoring in this distinction, the report presents more precise projections concerning the water required to feed the world today and in the future.

According to these new calculations, another 45 million hectares will be irrigated by 2030 in 93 developing countries, where most of the population growth will take place. About 60% of all land that could be irrigated will be in use. This will require an increase by 14% of irrigation water, according to the report.

Of the some 170 countries and territories surveyed, 20 are already using more than 40% of their renewable water resources for irrigation, "a threshold used to flag the level at which countries are forced to make difficult choices between their agricultural and urban water supply sectors", says the report. Another 16 countries use more than 20%, "which can indicate impending water scarcity. By 2030 South Asia will on average have reached the 40% level, and the Near East and North Africa not less than 58%".

By contrast, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and East Asia are likely to remain far below the critical threshold. These regions will see the bulk of agricultural expansion in the next 30 years.

The challenge lies in improving efficiency of land and water use. Irrigation is extremely inefficient - close to 60% of the water used is wasted. This will only improve by an estimated total of 4%. There is a tremendous need to improve

the financing of better technology and to promote better management practices.

On a more positive note, average grain yields doubled between 1962 and 1996, from 1.4 to 2.8 tons/hectares/crop. This means that less than half the amount of arable land is now required to grow the same amount of grain. "By 2030, it is expected that 80% of increased crop production will come from higher yields, increased multiple cropping and shorter fallow periods," says the report.

"Towards 2050, the world could enjoy access to food for all," says the report. "The fact that 815 million are presently ravaged by chronic undernourishment is not due to a lack of capacity to produce the required food, but to global and national social, economic and political contexts that permit, and sometimes cause, unacceptable levels of poverty to perpetuate."

According to the World Water Development Report:

\* Using treated wastewater could ease the water crisis. Farmers already use this resource for about 10% of irrigated land in developing countries and could use more. With proper treatment, it can actually improve soil fertility.

\* Food security is improving globally. Per capita food consumption in developing countries rose from 2,054 kcal per day in 1965 to 2,681 in 1998.

\* Pastures and crops take up 37% of the earth's land area.

\* About 10% of the world's irrigated lands have been damaged by waterlogging and salinisation because of poor drainage and irrigation practices.

## Ecology

"By the year 2025, it is predicted that water withdrawal will increase by 50% in developing countries and 18% in developed countries," says the report. "Effects on the world's ecosystems have the potential to dramatically worsen the present situation...."

The report describes a vicious circle unleashed by growing water demand. By depleting and polluting rivers, lakes and wetlands, we are destroying ecosystems which play an essential role in filtering and assuring freshwater resources.

(To be continued)