

World Water Day, March 22, 2010



A woman on her way to a water distribution site in Tora, Northern Darfur. 26 July 2009

There are about a billion people without clean water and 2.5 billion without adequate sanitation, a major silent humanitarian disaster, of great concern to the UN. Unlike wars and natural disasters it does not make media headlines and claims more lives through disease than wars claim through guns.

One hundred and one UN staff members died in the devastating earthquake in Haiti. Nevertheless, UNICEF was ready with its emergency WASH (water, sanitation and hygiene) program. Along with food and shelter, safe water and sanitation are high priorities in emergency situations as there is danger of an outbreak of diarrhea, cholera and other diseases.

UNICEF, partnering with a local water-purification and distribution company, distributed 2.6 million liters of drinking water daily to over half a million people in the capital Port-au-Prince and other cities. Every day at least 150 trucks, each filled with 5000 liters of water, are sent out to 200 distribution points. Also, water purification tablets and family water kits are provided. UNICEF is working with partners to install 30,000 latrines in the next six months.

The WASH emergency interventions have been used in many emergencies such as the earthquake in Indonesia, Darfur and the major 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

Is there enough water in the World? Is it a question of scarcity?

World Water Day, March 22, 2010

Some commentators trace the global challenge in water to rising population and the resulting increase in demand . A major UN report rejects this view and claims that the scarcity at the heart of the global water crisis is rooted in flawed water management of a basically renewable resource, in unequal power, poverty, and inequality. and not in physical availability. In short, it is a political problem relating to inequality.

There are great inequalities in access to clean water and sanitation. In high- income areas of cities in Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa people enjoy access to several hundred liters of water a day delivered into their homes at low prices by public utilities. Meanwhile, slum dwellers and poor households in rural areas of the same countries have access to much less than 20 liters of water per day.

Agriculture is the main use of water. In water stressed parts of India irrigation pumps extract water from aquifers 24 hours a day for wealthy farmers while neighboring smallholders depend on the vagaries of rain.

People living in rich countries are only dimly aware how clean water fostered progress in their own countries. Just over a hundred years ago London, New York and Paris were centers of infectious diseases. Child death rates were as high as they are now in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. The sanitation movement and sweeping reforms changed this picture by spending the money for sewage systems and the required infrastructure for clean water .By one estimate water purification explains much of the great mortality reduction in the US in the first third of the 20th century. In Great Britain the expansion of sanitation contributed to an unprecedented increase in life expectancy of 15 years in the four decades after 1880.

One UN report states that the toilet and the latrine , which helped revolutionize public health in the wealthy countries are the most underused tools to combat poverty and disease. The report blames governments of paying little attention to water and sanitation and seriously under funding programs for improvement. In developing countries , without regulation, more than 90 per cent of sewage and 70 per cent of industrial wastewater is dumped untreated into surface water.

World Water Day, March 22, 2010

Water resources often cross political boundaries without a passport in the form of rivers, lakes and aquifers. This hydrological interdependence raises issues of conflict and cooperation. Some have raised the spectre of water wars. The facts are otherwise. Conflicts over water do arise and give rise to political tensions, but most disputes are resolved peacefully. The permanent Indus Water Commission which oversees a treaty on water sharing survived and functioned during two wars between India and Pakistan. Another example is the low-level water cooperation between Israel and Jordan began, under UN auspices, in the early 1950s when the countries were still at war. In 1994 they created a Joint Water Committee for coordination, sharing and dispute settlement- an arrangement that survived some acute tensions.

The message of this, and many other examples, is that the most hostile enemies have the capacity for cooperation on water.

Since the world is ever more interdependent let's hope that the necessary cooperation in water is a model in other areas.

Dr. Sylvain Ehrenfeld, International Humanist Ethical Union and the National Ethical Service of the American Ethical Union representative to the UN and Temma Ehrenfeld, free lance writer.