

Check Against Delivery

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FUND
TO THE HIGH LEVEL SEGMENT OF THE COMMISSION
ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: 'RESPONDING TO
CHALLENGES'**

New York – 29 April 2004

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen:

On behalf of UNICEF, I thank you for this opportunity to address the Commission – and to highlight the critically important links between water and sanitation in the implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Mr. Chairman, UNICEF fully supports the Commission's efforts to reach the MDG targets for safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

Indeed, our proven 40-year record of water, environment and sanitation programmes throughout the developing world has made UNICEF a key agency in the drive to develop capacity-building all the way down to the community level.

The subject is especially relevant now because this is the first year of a two-year cycle during which we will be evaluating progress toward the sustainable development commitments reflected in Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, and relevant sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development.

In that connection, let me highlight three areas of concern that will require far more attention if we are to reach the Millennium Development Goals for water and sanitation – as well as hasten the implementation of the goals for poverty reduction, under-5 mortality and education.

First: we must ensure that sanitation is given equal importance to water resources in sector efforts to achieve the MDGs.

Diarrhoeal diseases currently kill some 2 million young children a year. That is a far cry from the 4.6 million under-5 children killed by diarrhoea in 1982 – but these are all needless, wholly preventable deaths arising from poor sanitation and unhygienic behaviours. And despite the overall decline in mortality from diarrhoeal disease, the overall health burden of morbidity has not decreased – water- and sanitation-related disease and infections leave millions of children malnourished, physically stunted and mentally retarded or blind.

That is why UNICEF is committed to working closely with its partners in Asia and Africa to meet the demand for low cost, sustainable sanitation projects.

The challenge we face is formidable. In 1990, half the world's population, about 2.6 billion people, lacked access to sanitation. New estimates from WHO and UNICEF indicate that today, while the percentage of men, women and children who still lack access to basic sanitary facilities has been slightly reduced, almost as many people are still without basic sanitation. And if current trends hold, by 2015, one-third of the world's population will lack basic sanitation.

Second: we must ensure that primary schools provide safe drinking water and basic sanitation services.

Quality basic education, particularly the education of girls, is an essential prerequisite of any global anti-poverty strategy because it produces people who can contribute to the economic and social development necessary to eradicate poverty.

That is why a major focus of UNICEF is on achieving quality basic education, especially for girls and women, as a central requirement for ensuring their empowerment and advancement.

But worldwide, far too many schools lack hygienic conditions – and girls trying to secure their right to a basic quality education are often the most affected. Moreover, the same conditions can also threaten school children with common infections like diarrhoea and worms.

UNICEF and its partners have responded by supporting the improvement of water and sanitation facilities at primary schools. In the past five years we have quadrupled the number of countries where we are supporting hygiene improvement programmes to more than 70. And we have found that the central role of schools within communities also presents opportunities to inspire wider community action to accelerate sanitation coverage.

Let me add, Mr. Chairman, that UNICEF welcomes the outcome of the 13th Meeting of the Roundtable on Sustainable Development held at OECD last month, requested by Minister Brende to focus on CSD 12, where a strong argument was made for involving schools in teaching basic sanitation practices and ensuring that funds for water and sanitation facilities are a top priority.

The third and last area of concern is the growing number and severity of humanitarian crisis situations.

Emergencies and situations of instability that threaten the rights of children are more and more frequent in many regions of the world. And when emergencies hit, UNICEF is quickly on the ground, delivering water and sanitation services to people displaced by natural disasters, forced immigration and armed conflict.

Our Core Commitments for Children in Emergencies prioritise water availability for drinking and hygiene, water purification, the provision of soap for hand washing, and support for the installation of emergency sanitary facilities.

UNICEF's water and sanitation programmes seek to build local capacities to respond in emergencies. For example, in both Mozambique and Bangladesh, where floods are frequent, preparedness at provincial level includes the pre-positioning of critical water pumping equipment and water purification supplies, as well as latrine materials.

Let me conclude, Mr Chairman, by assuring the Commission that UNICEF is committed to working with its partners to ensure that, prior to next year's CSD 13, concrete steps are taken to accelerate progress toward the water and sanitation targets. There is no more direct way to improve the lives of hundreds of millions of impoverished children.

Thank you.