

The Global Water Crisis Disproportionately Affects the Developing World

Developing Nations, 2008

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People living in the United States or any industrialized nation take safe drinking water for granted. But in much of the developing world, access to clean water is not guaranteed. According to the World Health Organization, more than 1.2 billion people lack access to clean water, and more than 5 million people die every year from contaminated water or water-related diseases.

The world's nations, through the United Nations (UN), have recognized the critical importance of improving access to clean water and ensuring adequate sanitation and have pledged to cut the proportion of people without such access by half by 2015 as part of the UN Millennium Development Goals. However, even if these goals are reached, tens of millions of people will probably perish from tainted water and water-borne diseases by 2020.

A Reachable Goal

Although ensuring clean water for all is a daunting task, the good news is that the technological know-how exists to treat and clean water and convey it safely. The international aid community and many at-risk nations are already working on a range of efforts to improve access to water and sanitation.

It is clear, however, that more aid will be needed, although the estimates of how much vary widely. There is also considerable debate about the proper mix of larger, more costly projects and smaller, more community-scale projects. Still, it seems that bringing basic water services to the world's poorest people could be done at a reasonable price probably far less than consumers in developed countries now spend on bottled water.

The Toll of the Water Crisis

The global water crisis is a serious threat, and not only to those who suffer, get sick, and die from tainted water or water-borne disease. There is also a growing realization that the water crisis undercuts economic growth in developing nations, can worsen conflicts over resources, and can even affect global security by worsening conditions in states that are close to failure.

According to a Pacific Institute analysis, between 34 and 76 million people could perish because of contaminated water or water-related diseases by 2020, even if the UN Millennium Development Goals are met.

Despite the toll of the global water crisis, industrial nations spend little on overseas development efforts such as water and sanitation projects. Only 5 of 22 nations have met the modest UN goal of spending 0.7 percent of a nation's gross national income on overseas development assistance. And only a fraction of all international assistance is spent on water and sanitation projects. From 1999 to 2001, an average of only \$3 billion annually was provided for water supply and sanitation projects.

The Expense of Bottled Water

Although tap water, in most of the developed world is clean and safe, millions of consumers drink bottled water for taste, convenience, or because of worries about water quality. Comprehensive data on bottled water consumption in the developing world are scarce. However, some water experts are worried that increased sales of bottled water to the developing world will reduce pressure on governments to provide basic access to non-bottled water. Others are concerned that the world's poorest people will have to spend a significant amount of their already low incomes to purchase water.

Consumers spend nearly \$100 billion annually on bottled water, according to Pacific Institute estimates. Indeed, consumers often pay several hundred to a thousand times as much for bottled water as they do for reliable, high-quality tap water, which costs \$.50 per cubic meter in California. This disparity is often worse in developing nations where clean water is far out of reach for the poorest people.

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