

UN launches International Year of Sanitation to address global crisis

NEW YORK, 21 November 2007 – The United Nations today officially launched the International Year of Sanitation to accelerate progress for 2.6 billion people world wide who are without proper sanitation facilities. Every year inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene contribute to the deaths of 1.5 million children.

“Access to sanitation is deeply connected to virtually all the Millennium Development Goals, in particular those involving the environment, education, gender equality and the reduction of child mortality and poverty,” Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said. “An estimated 42,000 people die every week from diseases related to low water quality and an absence of adequate sanitation. This situation is unacceptable.”

The International Year of Sanitation, 2008, is a theme year set by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 to help put this global crisis at the forefront of the international agenda.

“Today, we go from a stage of planning to one of implementation,” said His Royal Highness Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, Chairperson of the United Nations Secretary-General’s Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB). “It is vital that progress is accelerated if we are to reach the Millennium Development Goal target on sanitation, and indeed the other development goals.”

Though more than 1.2 billion people worldwide have gained access to improved sanitation between 1990 and 2004, an estimated 2.6 billion people - including 980 million children – have lagged behind. The world needs to accelerate progress in order to meet the Millennium Development Goal target to reduce by half the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation, such as simple latrines, by 2015.

If current trends continue, there will be 2.4 billion people without basic sanitation in 2015, with children continuing to pay the price in lost lives, missed schooling, in disease, malnutrition and poverty.

Lack of toilets makes women and girls vulnerable to violence if they are forced to defecate only after nightfall and in secluded areas. Sanitation enhances dignity, privacy and safety, especially for women and girls. Schools with decent toilet facilities enable children, especially girls reaching puberty, to remain in the educational system.

“Clean, safe and dignified toilet and hand-washing facilities in schools help ensure that girls get the education they need and deserve,” said Ann M. Veneman, UNICEF Executive Director. “When girls get an education, the whole community benefits. The International Year of Sanitation highlights the need for investments in proper sanitation facilities around the world.”

The year will include major regional conferences on sanitation as part of capacity building initiatives, including one that will focus on school sanitation. It will also encourage public and private partnerships, to help tap into the comparative strengths of each sector to accelerate progress, advocate and raise awareness on sanitation, leverage additional funding, and develop country-level road maps.

It is estimated that improved sanitation facilities could reduce diarrhoea-related deaths in young children by more than one-third. If hygiene promotion is added, such as teaching proper hand washing, deaths could be reduced by two thirds. It would also help accelerate economic and social development in countries where poor sanitation is a major cause of lost work and school days because of illness.

Progress requires broad cooperation through public and private partnerships, community involvement and public awareness. Investing approximately \$10 billion per year can halve the proportion of people without basic sanitation by 2015. If sustained, the same investment could achieve basic sanitation for the entire world within one or two decades. This sum is less than one per cent of world military spending in 2005, one-third of the estimated global spending on bottled water, or about as much as Europeans spend on ice cream each year. While the funding needed for sanitation is not overwhelmingly large, the return on that investment is potentially great.

The launch of the theme year, which runs through 2008, was organized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) in collaboration with the UN-Water Task Force on Sanitation. The event was attended by UN Member States, NGOs, citizen groups, academics and the private sector as well as members of the Secretary-General's Advisory Board.

“Sanitation is not a dirty word; it is a critical factor in human welfare and sustainable development,” said Mr. Sha Zukang, Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs. “We need to put the spotlight on this silent crisis.”

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Note to editors:

The United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (www.unsgab.org) is an independent body that advises the UN Secretary-General on policies and programmes and organizes global actions on water and sanitation issues. UN-Water (www.unwater.org) is a coordination mechanism made up of the UN agencies, programmes and funds that have a significant role in tackling global water concerns.