

This report highlights human and economic cost of lack of clean water and sanitation.



The humble flush toilet, taken for granted in most rich countries, could be a cheap but powerful tool to slash childhood deaths and boost global development, a U.N. report said Thursday.

The annual report of the U.N. Development Program said that lack of access to clean water and basic sanitation killed nearly 2 million young children each year. This amounted to nearly 5,000 deaths per day, most of them preventable, and made diarrhea the second biggest childhood killer.

"No access to sanitation is a polite way of saying that people draw water for drinking, cooking and washing from rivers, lakes, ditches and drains fouled with human and animal excrement," said Kevin Watkins, the main author.

"The toilet may seem an unlikely catalyst for human development, but the report provides abundant and powerful evidence to show how it benefits people's well being," he said.

The report cited Peruvian studies that the installation of a flush toilet in the home increased by almost 60 percent the chances of a child surviving to the first birthday and in Egypt by 57 percent.

The report, "Beyond scarcity: Power, politics and the global water crisis" painted a grim picture of global imbalances and the low political priority accorded to safe drinking water and sanitation.

"Dripping taps in rich countries lose more water than is available each day to more than 1 billion people," it said.

It said that 2.4 billion people have no access to sanitation and 1 billion people have no access to clean water. Many of those without adequate water used 5 liters (about a gallon) per day, compared to 200 liters (about 50 gallons) in Europe and 400 liters (about 100 gallons) in the United States.

People living in urban slums typically paid 5-10 times more per liter (quart) than people living in high-income areas because they had to buy from vendors, truckers and water carriers. People living in the poorest parts of cities like the Ghanaian capital Accra and Manila in the Philippines paid more than the residents of New York, Paris and London, it said.

Nearly 100 million children were kept out of school because of sickness. The time spent by women in developing countries walking to fetch water was the same as the entire productive hours worked by the French labor force, Watkins said.

The report called for a global campaign - similar to the Global Fund against AIDS, TB and malaria to try to coordinate all the fragmented efforts of different agencies working with water.

Watkins said rich countries needed to show more political leadership and follow through on promises to implement an action plan on water made at the G8 summit in France three years ago.

"What we've seen since then is no action and no plan. It's not even on the radar screen of donor countries and we need to get it there."

But the report also criticized developing countries for spending too little on water and sanitation.

Most sub-Saharan African countries normally spend 0.2-0.4 percent of budget on water and sanitation. In Ethiopia the military budget was 10 times the water and sanitation budget and in Pakistan 47 times, it said.

The report said two out of three people in South Asia lack basic sanitation, numbers that put the region on a par with sub-Saharan Africa. Out of the 2.6 billion people around the world who lack access to sanitation, 1.9 billion are in Asia, which is also home to 720 million out of the 1.1 billion people globally without satisfactory access to water, the report said.

In some major cities, such as Jakarta and Manila, levels of sewage coverage are lower, at 8 to 10 percent, than in West African cities such as Dakar and Abidjan, it said.

Thailand, though, boasts a national sanitation coverage rate has increased from 80 to 100 percent since 1990, said Hakan Bjorkman, UNDP deputy resident representative in Thailand, at press conference held Tuesday in Bangkok, Thailand.

Watkins said South Africa, which spends one percent of its budget on water and sanitation, should set an example to the rest of the world.

In South Africa, some 83 percent now have access to clean water compared to just 59 percent at the end of apartheid in 1994. Some 70 percent had access to acceptable sanitation compared to 48 percent in 1994.

The report said the US\$10 billion price tag to achieve U.N. goals on increasing access to water and sanitation should be put in context. "It represents less than five days worth of global military spending and less than half what rich countries spend each year on mineral water."

More generally, the report said that life expectancy in sub-Saharan Africa was lower than three decades ago, largely because of the HIV/AIDS crisis. Sub-Saharan Africa accounted for 28 of the 31 countries at the bottom of the UNDP's annual Human Development Index.

Countries at the top and bottom of the index were unchanged from last year. Norway ranked highest and Niger last. Norwegian citizens were 40 times richer than their counterparts in Niger and live almost twice as long, it said.

The combined income of the 500 richest people now exceeds that of the poorest 416 million.

The report questioned modern priorities.

It said in 2015 NASA planned to launch the Jupiter Icy Moons Project to investigate the composition of salt water lakes beneath three of Jupiter's moons and determine whether conditions for life exist. It compared the billions of dollars in spending on such scientific quests to the elusive effort to provide clean water on earth.

"Providing a glass of clean water and a toilet may be challenging, but it's not rocket science," it said.