

Stockholm conference told 1 billion people without access to safe water

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World Water Week, attended by around 2,500 scientists, government and civil society representatives from 140 countries, took place in Stockholm last month. It was held under the auspices of the Stockholm International Water Institute (SIWI).

Globally, some 1 billion people do not have access to safe water and 2.5 billion people are without sanitation. A press release issued by the SIWI at the end of the week stated: “Slow progress on sanitation will cause the world to badly fail the Millennium Development Goals while weak policy, poor management, increasing waste and exploding water demands are pushing the planet towards the tipping point of global water crisis.”

Speaking at the opening session James Leape, the director general of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), explained: “Behind the world food crisis is a global freshwater crisis, expected to rapidly worsen as climate change impacts intensify.... Irrigation-fed agriculture provides 45 percent of the world’s food supplies, and without it, we could not feed our planet’s population of six billion people.”

He went on to warn that in many areas of the world, water is being taken from rivers and groundwater storage at a faster rate than it can be replenished. Irrigated areas of land are becoming highly stressed.

A 2003 WWF report on the impact of climate change on the melting of glaciers explained: “Seventy percent of the world’s freshwater is frozen in glaciers...releasing water during dry seasons or years...often providing the only source of water for humans and wildlife during dry parts of the year. Freshwater is already a limiting resource for much of the planet.... The Himalayan glaciers that feed seven of the great rivers of Asia and ensure a year-round water supply to two billion people are retreating at a startlingly fast rate.”

This process of glacier melting has only increased in the intervening five years since the WWF report was published.

One of the contributors at Stockholm was Barbara Frost, chief executive of the international charity Water Aid, whose remit is to “overcome poverty by enabling the world’s poorest people to gain access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education.”

In a statement released just prior to the meeting in Stockholm, Barbara Frost said: “Sanitation is often the poor relation in the water and sanitation sector, it is an area of international development that is chronically neglected.... The historical evidence from Europe, North America and more recently from East Asia is compelling; improved sanitation helps bring rapid human and economic development.... 2.5 billion people, nearly 40% of the world’s population, lack access to basic sanitation. In Africa the situation is getting worse; on current trends the Millennium Development Goals to halve the proportion of people without access to sanitation will not be met in Sub-Saharan Africa until next century.”

Water Aid issued a report in July of this year titled “Tackling the silent killer: The case for sanitation.”

The report states: “Inadequate sanitation may be the biggest killer of children under the age of five and yet it remains the most neglected of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) sectors.... The existing evidence points to poor sanitation being a major factor in approximately 2.4 million child deaths annually.”

It goes on to note: “Each year 1.6 million children die from diarrhoea, more than malaria, measles and HIV/Aids combined. The World Health Organisation (UN body) estimates that 88%, or 1.4 million, of these deaths are caused by poor sanitation combined with unsafe drinking water.”

The report notes that it is not just reductions in deaths by diarrhoea that are brought about by proper sanitation. Two public health engineers working independently at the end of the nineteenth century, one in Australia, one in America, noted the reduction in child mortality brought about by adequate sanitation and safe water was much greater than could be attributed to cuts in death from diarrhoea alone. This has been backed up by more recent research.

It further notes: “Sanitation-related disease was the major killer of children in nineteenth century Europe and North America.... In the UK unprecedented reductions in infant mortality were brought about by a government-led drive on sanitation. The number of children dying before their fifth birthday fell by almost one third in the decade from 1900.... if the same was achieved in Nigeria in the decade preceding 2015, 1.65 million child lives would be saved in just 10 years.”

The *British Medical Journal*, in a recent survey, described sanitation as the greatest medical invention in the last 150 years.

The report explains: “[A]greement of an MDG target for sanitation has failed to mobilise the necessary political will. Political neglect characterises the sanitation sector at the international and national levels.... The failure to increase access to sanitation acts as a brake on development and makes the realisation of broader development outcomes both unlikely and unsustainable.”

The link between lack of sanitation and poverty is starkly drawn by the report’s note that “Over half of those who lack access to sanitation live on less than \$2 a day.”

A recent book published by Earthscan, *The Last Taboo: Opening the Door on the Global Sanitation Crisis*, written by Maggie Black and Ben Fawcett, takes up the same issues covered by the Water Aid report.

Writing in the *Guardian* newspaper at the end of August, Maggie Black noted that it is exactly 150 years since the London “Great Stink.” This was caused by hot summer weather, leading to a reduced water flow in the River Thames flowing through London. The stink was the result of the practice of the city’s sewage being emptied straight into the river, and the hot weather and reduced flow greatly exacerbated the obnoxious smell emanating from the river.

The overwhelming stench could not be avoided by

politicians meeting in the Houses of Parliament that adjoin the river. It concentrated their minds on coming up with a solution to the “stink” and led to the construction of a publicly funded sewage system that had a major impact on public health improvement.

Black noted: “If only such action was expressed today. Great Stinks are still routinely emanated by rivers swollen with raw sewage and reduced to a trickle in the hot season in parts of Asia, Africa and Central America. But the stench does not instill the same degree of terror.”

She continued: “Programmes for water and sanitation conveniently forget the ‘S’ word.... They spend the lion’s share of their resources on water: 95% in Madagascar, for example, leaving just 3p per head a year to spend on sanitation.”

“Madagascar is typical. Sanitation has rock-bottom political priority in country after country. Privatisation of municipal utilities—at the bidding of the World Bank and others—has compounded the problem, since any profits to be made are all in water supply, which people need to survive. But sanitation is a public good and, as the Victorians discovered, needs to be subsidised from the public purse.”

The rising bourgeoisie in the mid-nineteenth century could still play a progressive role initiating such projects as public sewage systems. Today, the financial elite play an entirely parasitic role and, far from promoting new schemes, are enriching themselves partly by plundering much-needed resources.



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