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Event report

Safe Water Provisioning as the Key to Global Health

Speakers included **Syed Aljunid**, Senior Research Fellow at the United Nations University - International Institute for Global Health; **Corinne Schuster-Wallace**, Programme Officer at the United Nations University – Institute for Water, Environment and Health and **George Yap**, Program Director for WaterCan. The moderator was **Susan Elliott**, Senior Research Fellow at the United Nations University – Institute for Water, Environment and Health.

Wednesday, April 14, 2010, 1.15pm – 2.30pm

On the occasion of the 43rd session of the **UN Commission on Population and Development**, the **United Nations University** organized an event entitled **Safe Water Provisioning as the Key to Global Health**, as part of the UNU Worldwide in New York Series. The goal of the event was to enhance debate and dialogue around the global water and sanitation crises and their links to health and development, particularly within the context of rural, remote or otherwise marginalised communities.

The speakers were welcomed and introduced by moderator, Susan Elliott.

Address

Mr. George Yap began by stating that the key to tackling the problem of sanitation was more and better investment. He said that it was important for the audience to understand six current issues in the field of water and sanitation: the poor definition of sanitation, the difference between household and community facilities, the role of subsidies, project time frames, the role of NGOs and gender divisions.

He reminded the audience that sanitation is ‘not the same as toilets’. Indeed, he defined sanitation as “the proper disposal of human excreta”. Mr. Yap said that the major water contamination source is open field defecation. For this reason, he stressed that behavioral change is what is needed to effect change on the issue.

Although water supply is a common good, he also made a distinction between building facilities for households and those for communities. Regarding the role of subsidies, he considered that there has been a major rethink in the last 10 years.

Mr. Yap then went on to stress that improving water access has much to do with engineering; as long as the resources are there, a well can be built within a relatively short time frame. He considered that, on the other hand, improving sanitation standards involves behavioural change, and it takes a long time for people to change their behavior. He also noted the important role of NGOs and community-based

operations. Whilst local authorities must take a leadership role, the NGO role is critical to making projects a success.

He concluded by saying that the problems of water and sanitation disproportionately affect women and girls. As the primary care givers, women have the main burden of maintaining their family's health; a key risk to this is poor water access and sanitation. This can give rise to serious problems. For instance, without proper facilities, women may be forced to defecate or urinate outside, in unsafe environments, where they may be subject to sexual harassment and rape; second, a lack of sanitation facilities can be a reason why girl children do not go to school. Furthermore, the task of water collection often falls to women, who have to take 3 hours out of their day to fetch water which is precious time they could be using to do other things.

Mr. Syed Mohamed Aljunid started by mentioning that health morbidity and mortality is this year's focus of the Commission on Population and Development. He considered that this is very timely, as it is predicted that most developing countries will fail to meet the health-related Millennium Development Goals by 2015. In order to put the goals back on track, he said that calls have been made to strengthen primary health care systems.

He reminded the audience that 10% of global disease is water-related, 88% of this figure is related to unsafe water supplies; Mr. Aljunid then cited the example of dengue fever, a disease which affects 2.5 billion people worldwide, and kills 24,000 people every year.

Mr. Aljunid said that there had been some barriers to progress over the past few years. For instance, he exemplified the lack of trained health professionals and the scarcity of financial resources. He also pointed out that governments' health budgets devoted too little at present to primary health care.

Ms. Corinne Schuster-Wallace noted that 1.6 billion people do not have access to adequate sanitation, and that diarrhea is the second biggest killer of children under 5, responsible for 1.5 million deaths a year. She believes that sanitation has been the poor relation of drinking water for too long.

She also argued that sanitation should be both community-based and community-driven. In this sense, rural Bangladesh has been a success story. She recognized that it is difficult to ensure sustained use of toilets; however, she felt that using traditional marketing techniques to promote sanitation messages could help overcome this.

Ms. Schuster-Wallace said she urged developed countries to recommit to 0.7% of their GDP to overseas aid, and added that she would like to lobby for 0.002% of this money to be invested in sanitation. Beyond the MDGs for water and sanitation, she suggested a new target of 100% coverage by 2025. She hoped that water and sanitation would be covered as part of the G8's meeting in Canada, since they are integral to improving children and women's health.

She invited the audience to read the UNU-INWEH report, “Sanitation as a Key to Global Health: Voices from the field”.

Question and Answer Session

Having thanked Mr. Yap, Mr. Aljunid and Ms. Schuster-Wallace for their remarks, Ms. Elliott took questions from the audience.

How do we address these problems within the formal political system, that is to say, at the ministry level?

George Yap recognized that health ministries clearly do not have enough money. However, Ms. Schuster-Wallace noted that there are many solutions which could arise through the formal political system, depending on the context; for example, in Madagascar, she explained that the government has established a special ministry of sanitation to give the issue a higher profile. She also said that another possibility would be to establish an inter-ministerial committee on sanitation as it’s an issue that cuts across a lot of departmental mandates. Mr. Yap additionally mentioned that there has been an increasing awareness amongst lobbyists that their arguments need to be broadened in order to secure more investment for sanitation projects. ‘As it’s the financiers that control the purse strings’, Mr. Yap said that lobbyists have had to make their case in economic rather than social or moral terms.

Mr. Aljunid remarked that water legislation is fragmented. He mentioned that in Malaysia for example, the ministry of women’s affairs tackles issues of women’s health including sanitation, and has been very effective at doing this thus far.

What do you recommend for Haiti?

Ms. Schuster-Wallace considered that Haiti is still in emergency mode. For her, the question is how to make a transition from this emergency situation to a more sustainable one.

How can we solve the problems of water access in rural areas? The current solutions only work for urban areas.

Mr. Aljunid recognized that urban areas are better positioned to use centralized systems. This is due to the fact that because the population is denser, resources are the most effectively distributed.

Mr. Yap noted that at the moment all that exists at the local level are pit latrines. For him, the problem is that it is more expensive to invest in these for every rural community than a centralized system; in addition, the benefits also accrue to only a very small number of people per latrine, usually only one family.

As an environmentalist, it seems to me that water is too often disassociated from its environmental context in discussions like today's. Should we not think of it in more holistic terms?

Ms. Schuster-Wallace said that at UNU-INWEH, water is situated within its ecological context in their research. Yet she also underlined that at the same time, water cannot be divorced from health, since the connection between the two is so important.

Are religious and political organisations impediments to progress in water access and sanitation?

Mr. Yap said that in fact, without political organisations, the Paul Simon Act would not have come into being: an act which actually mandates the US government to invest in water sanitation. Also, he reminded the audience that Water Advocates, the lobbying group, has done great work over the years in lobbying Congress on water and sanitation issues.