

WATER PROJECTS IN THE UN'S INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SANITATION, KATE ESHELBY FINDS OUT WHAT PROGRESS IS BEING MADE

Slums top water agenda

Among the piles of rubbish in Bangladesh's capital city, Dhaka, children as young as four scavenge for rubbish. Their feet immersed in putridity, they separate plastic from paper and paper from bottles to sell for pathetic sums to recycling businesses. The rubbish stretches to the horizon, dwarfing their small figures.

With a population of more than ten million, Dhaka is one of the world's mega-cities. In the last quarter of the 20th century, the metropolitan population increased by 470 per cent. In 2008, another 8,000 a week are expected to move there from rural areas. In slums such as Outfall, Zakir and Balurmath, 3.4million people live in closely packed shacks, lifted on stilts above pits of stagnant water, rubbish and human waste. There is no water supply, no drainage and no waste disposal.

Until recently, the Dhaka Water Supply and Sewerage Authority only provided connections to households that could prove their legal right to live in their home. Slum land is privately owned. Slum dwellers have no rights and are under constant threat of being evicted; building toilets is of low concern for landlords.

Figures are stark

In the rest of Bangladesh, built across the flood plains of five monumental rivers, the problem is barely better. Frequent floods contaminate drinking water sources. Since the country was inundated by rains last August, Dhaka's International Centre for Diarrhoeal Disease Research, which normally takes around 150 patients a day, is now admitting up to 600.

In this, the UN's International Year of Sanitation and ahead of World Water Day on Saturday, the water-poor conditions of the world's



Living in hope: Children in the Dhaka slums work among rubbish that stretches as far as the eye can see. Now, with the help of aid organisations, they and their families are able to own their own toilets (right)

lowest-income people are being put to the top of the agenda. Figures are stark: across the world, diseases such as cholera and dysentery, caused by unsanitary conditions, kill 5,000 children a day, five times as many as those who die from HIV.

In Bangladesh, that amounts to 340 children a day – 20 per cent of all under-five deaths. Given figures like this, it's perhaps no surprise that Bangladesh is trying to lead the way in water cleanliness, committing to 100 per cent sanitation by 2010. Five years ahead of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target, that's a real challenge for a politically fragile country.

To kick off, last March, WaterAid and local partner Dushtha Shasthya Kendra (DSK) persuaded water authorities to connect the Zakir slum to the mains and establish

communal water pumps, signing on behalf of slum dwellers. Negotiations with landlords led to new communal latrines; the slum dwellers contribute towards them depending on their economic status.

First water bill

At the same time, in the Bauniabadh Kalabagan slum, 185 families proudly paid their first water bill after official permission was given for the first time to supply water without a guarantor. This only became possible when WaterAid funded a DSK programme to set up community-based organisations to oversee the maintenance of waterpoints and collect money for bills.

In both instances, contrary to popular preconceptions of their fecklessness, slum dwellers proved themselves ready and willing to pay

a fair price for water. 'By using contaminated water, we became affected by various skin diseases and diarrhoea,' says community leader Shahida Begum. 'Now we are free from those dangers.'

Education is essential so that more people break with habits of the past. Local non-governmental organisations such as Dhaka Ahsania Mission have taught children to name and shame those who continue to defecate in public areas, turning them into whistleblowers by, quite literally, giving them whistles to blow.

'Progress can be made because there has been a shift in attitude,' says Paul Edwards, sanitation chief for Unicef in Bangladesh. 'People now understand the importance of sanitation and want to own their own toilets.' It's not just about clean water. Sanitation keenly affects

other issues of development. 'Despite overwhelming evidence that sanitation is one of the most cost-effective interventions for reducing child deaths, it remains the most neglected of all the MDGs,' says WaterAid chief executive Barbara Frost.

Prioritise the crisis

It's crucial that this summer's G8 meeting in Hokkaido, Japan, should prioritise the crisis. The money needed to reach the international MDG sanitation target is £5billion a year, half the amount rich countries spend on bottled water. Until that target is reached, the children of Dhaka's rubbish dumps will be forced to continue plying their dirty and dangerous trade.

■ For more information on the International Year of Sanitation visit <http://esa.un.org/iys>

Edited by BEL JACOBS focus@ukmetro.co.uk

BOOK NOW
for discounted
tickets (quote MET)



-IN THE CITY-

Grand Hall, Olympia | 27th-30th March 2008 | Ticket Hotline 0844 415 4416

ANTI AGEING CLINIC • HEALTH ASSESSMENT CENTRE • CATWALK SHOWS • DAY SPA • HAPPINESS THEATRE • HAIR SALON • NAIL BAR • YOGA STUDIO • FITNESS STAGE

The
Vitality
Show

sponsored by

müller