

Water and business summit 2008

Barbara Frost, WaterAid's Chief Executive

Good morning everyone and thank you for the invitation to speak here at the first water and business summit 2008. WaterAid always welcomes the opportunity to talk about water poverty and the global water crisis – a subject close to all of our hearts.

We are all familiar with the irony of living on the blue planet, we have water in abundance, 70 percent of our planet is water. However, in reality slightly less than one one-hundredth of one percent of the world's total supply of water is easily accessible as lakes, rivers, and shallow groundwater sources. Water is the world's most precious resource and most essentially is the cornerstone to life and for many people in developing countries getting safe water can be the first step out of poverty.

There is a fundamental economic and social benefit to invest in water and sanitation. The WHO estimates that for every \$1 invested in the water and sanitation sector there is an \$9 return – based on the improved health and productivity this brings. Indeed a very impressive return on investment.

Water is life. Today while we are talking about water neutrality or water supply management, let's remember that there are gross injustices and inequities in the world that see nearly a billion people without safe water.

In fact there is a global water crisis happening right now – with just under 1 billion of the world's poorest people having to fetch water from unsafe sources. Women and children are having to walk long distances, missing the opportunities to go to school or earn a living. The global sanitation situation is arguably the greatest human catastrophes of our time, two fifths of people in the world don't have a safe place to go to the toilet - 2.5 billion people. Imagine what this means – a woman having to wait until dark to find a safe place to defecate – hardly healthy or dignified. For this reason the UN has declared this year the International Year of Sanitation to try and encourage investment in this vital and neglected sector.

The numbers are daunting and behind everyone is often a person living in chronic poverty and ill health suffering diarrheal diseases that robs their bodies of water and nutrition.

As a direct result of not having access to safe water and sanitation, 5,000 children die each every day and yet it goes unnoticed. Each one of these deaths is preventable.

There is a responsibility on all of us to do whatever we can to help overcome this crisis and to inspire the leadership and commitment in others.

WaterAid as many of you will know was set up by members of the UK water industry in 1981 after they had attended the UN's first decade of action for fresh water and were shocked at the suffering in developing countries as a result of lack of safe affordable water. We are a non governmental organisation with a vision of a world where everyone has access to safe water and sanitation. Over the last 27 years WaterAid has grown steadily and retained its focus on water and sanitation. We now operate in 17 countries across Africa and Asia and have Alliance partners in America and Australia and a turnover of over £40m. Last year by working with local organisations we enabled over 1.3 million people to get water and 3.6 million people sanitation. We are proud of this achievement but this is tempered by the fact that it is a drop in the ocean in comparison to the global situation.

There is a complex web of issues that exist at global and local levels which exacerbate the global water crisis – changing climate patterns, poor governance, lack of political will, rapid urbanisation, lack of resources and inappropriate technology.

Members of the global community have a part to play in making a difference – governments through ensuring their citizens do get safe water, donor governments through supporting the Millennium Development Goals, business through effective water stewardship and service provision, wealth generation and positive global citizenship; and civil society through partnership, empowering local communities and demonstrating equitable and sustainable solutions. WaterAid has strong relationships with civil society organisations in the countries where we work, the private and government sectors and aims to use our influence and experience strategically to catalyse change in the water and sanitation globally, nationally and at a local level.

We have seven guiding principles that underpin the way we work to deliver a solution based approach. Our experience has shown that this approach delivers results but it can be slow.

Appropriate solutions – People living in poverty need effective and reliable water and sanitation services which meet their real needs. The technology needs to be simple and sustainable – for instance there is no point importing pumps that have no spare parts chain locally.

Inclusive solutions – The needs of disadvantaged and excluded groups – women, disabled people, people living with HIV and Aids, older people and children are often forgotten. Imagine trying to use a pit latrine if you are an older person with arthritis.

Ensuring that the voices and needs of marginalised people are heard and that all parts of the community are actively involved in planning, building and managing the work is critical to long-term success. Facilities that communities do not have a sense of ownership over are unlikely to be sustained.

Local solutions – we work in partnership with local organisations – civil society, local government and small scale providers because they know the local context and are best placed to meet the needs at a local level. By strengthening their management capacity and skills to deliver we deliver our mission.

Transferable solutions – governments have a responsibility to ensure the provision of safe water and sanitation for their citizens. We use our practical experience, learning and evidence to demonstrate to them, and others how effective, appropriate, sustainable services can be delivered to meet the needs of the people who need them the most.

Integrated solutions – our work combines safe, affordable domestic water, effective sanitation and improved hygiene. This integrated approach provides health and poverty outcomes for poor communities.

Sustainable solutions – managing water depletion and contamination at local level are critical in the planning and design of our partners work. We also help to develop their managerial capabilities and invest in them to ensure organisational sustainability as well as ensuring their work is sustainable.

Accountable solutions – the organisations we work with are required to be accountable and transparent both to us and to the communities in which they operate. We ourselves promote open access to our own information, to enable scrutiny of our responsibilities and commitments.

I hope that this overview of WaterAid's work offers you an insight into our approach. If you would like to read more please have a look at our website and also check out the Financial Times that has chosen WaterAid for their seasonal appeal and has been visiting and featuring our work.

Wherever I travel in the developing world at village or city level poor communities all tell me that safe water is their most critical need and they will contribute whatever they can to bring this life giving resource close to their homes.

Businesses, governments, NGOs, individuals have an integral part to play in ending the water crisis.

I would like to thank all of you here who are already supporting our work and we do hope you are pleased with the results – as lives have been changed.