

African Ministers Call for New Effort to Cut Hygiene-Related Deaths

Sufficient Safe and Clean Water Must be Key Focus for Sustainable Future

Nairobi/Bonn, 6 December 2001 - Action to reduce death rates as a result of poor hygiene and disease-contaminated water should be put at the center of the crucial World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), African ministers said today.

The recommendation, which marks a new strategy in the field of water policy for Africa, comes in the wake of figures showing that 6,000 people a day, equivalent to the entire population of an African town like Luderitz, Namibia, or over 2 million a year, the equivalent of a quarter of the population of London, England, are dying as a result of sub standard sanitation.

The ministers, meeting in Bonn, Germany, at the International Conference on Freshwater, resolved to "put water, sanitation and hygiene issues from the margins to the center of the sustainable development agenda in Africa" adding that they hoped that the WSSD, taking place in Johannesburg next September, would deliver the much needed solutions to Africa's water and sanitation crisis.

In their Bonn, Ministerial Declaration, they say: " We call upon the cooperating partners of Africa and the international community to support a regional and global alliance for tackling water and sanitation problems". It adds that there is a need for " drastic measures to improve water, sanitation and hygiene conditions for all our peoples".

The 17-point declaration, agreed to by the ministers of Angola, Benin, Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea-Bissau, Lesotho, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mozambique, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo and Uganda, flags up a range of concerns that need to be addressed.

These include the fact that, with a population increase of 400 million by 2010, at least 17 countries on the Continent will be short of water within a decade.

"Their lack of water will severely constrain food production, ecosystem protection and socio-economic development, " they say.

"With recurring droughts and chronic water shortages in many areas, the majority of African governments and people pay an increasingly high price for the water or the lack of it.

The highest price is often paid by the poor majority in terms of money to buy small quantities of water, calories expended to fetch water from distant sources, impaired health, diminished livelihoods and even lost lives, thus exacerbating the cycle of poverty.

Today over 300 million people in Africa still do not have reasonable access to safe water. Even more lack adequate sanitation, " says the declaration.

The declaration also highlights how almost half of the people in Africa have suffer from water-related diseases; how habitats, ecosystems and aquatic species are at risk from the increasing demand for water and the lack of agreements between countries on the equitable share of water resources such as underground aquifers, lakes and rivers.

"With over 50 major, international, water basins in Africa procedures for avoiding or resolving international disputes over water are largely lacking, | say the ministers.

The declaration underscores Africa's commitment to tackle such issues through the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), recently adopted by African Heads of State.

It also calls on developed nations to join in the effort by a renewed attempt to meet the development assistance targets as set down in the 2000 Millennium Declaration.

"It is our hope that future international support will be proportionate to the gravity and magnitude of the water and sanitation problems in Africa,"| the ministers state.

Eight key actions need to be carried out by African countries and the international community to deliver sufficient safe and clean water for people and wildlife.

Efforts are to be focused on a range of issues including:

Governance of the water sector: including strengthening of policy, laws and institutional reforms and the decentralization and empowerment of local communities to help deliver successful water resource management.

Intergovernmental policy dialogue for water security: including the building of an African Regional Ministerial Forum for Water to help overcome the various difficulties Africa's faces in relation to water security and health.

Financing for the development of the water sector: Ministers have agreed to mobilize resources to meet water challenges and to try and create the conditions to attract the massive investments needed for water and sanitation. The ministers also agreed to hold a meeting of the 53 African ministers in charge of water in Nigeria in March or April next year.

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