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Policy Brief

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IN SUMMARY

- Diarrhoeal diseases are a major cause of morbidity and mortality in South-East and East Asia, and could be largely prevented by improvement in water, sanitation and hygiene.
- Health authorities should strengthen their roles in evidence-based advocacy and policy development directed towards environmental and social determinants of health, particularly for improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene.
- The 2nd Ministerial Forum on Environment and Health is requested to endorse the Manila Declaration on Sanitation and Hygiene in East Asia which, among other things, calls upon the TWG WHS to act as the regional platform for facilitating cooperation towards the improvement of sanitation and hygiene in East Asia.
- Health and environment authorities should promote the use of Water Safety Plans and improvement of operations and maintenance practices, in urban and rural water supply systems, to improve drinking-water quality.

Overview

As a group, the 14 countries comprising the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asian Countries are not on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target for sanitation. If current trends continue, the countries will fall short of the group's 2015 target of 74% by 6 percentage points.

This situation exists despite impressive efforts made by government over the past two decades. The proportion of people served with some type of improved sanitation in Southeast and East Asia rose from 48% in 1990 to 62% in 2008. This means that despite a total population growth of 20% over the same period, the proportion of people served with sanitation increased 14 percentage points in the 14 countries. Nonetheless, about two of every five people in Southeast and East Asia today are without access to improved sanitation:

- almost 300 million people still need to share an improved type of sanitation facility with other households;
- nearly 400 million use precarious unimproved facilities; and over 100 million simply defecate in the open.

The rural population without access to sanitation services in East Asia is almost half a billion people.

Most countries are on track to achieve the MDG target for access to safe drinking-water, but this assumes that what is monitored, namely, access to improved sources of drinking-water, is equivalent to safe. In reality, regulation of drinking-water quality is weak in many countries.

Not surprisingly, diarrhoeal diseases are a major cause of morbidity and mortality in the region. In East Asia, there are 450 million cases of diarrhoea every year and the number of deaths reaches nearly 150 000 a year.² They are largely preventable by good sanitation and hygiene and a sufficient and safe

Overview(..cont')

water supply. Improved sanitation alone reduces diarrhoea death rates by a third (UNICEF & WHO, 2009)³.

Clearly there is a need to accelerate progress towards the MDG target for sanitation while improving hygiene practices and maintaining progress towards the MDG target for safe drinking water.

In many countries today, the responsibilities for developing and maintaining sanitation and drinking-water systems are functions of

government authorities other than health, such as ministries of construction, public works, or urban and rural development. Increasingly these responsibilities are also being decentralized. But given the heavy burden of disease attributable to sanitation and the related factors of hygiene and drinking water quality, it is evident that health authorities have an inherent responsibility to take an active role as an intersectoral partner. There is an urgent need however to improve the un-

derstanding of the functions of health authorities in this regard and to encourage consensus with other intersectoral partners.

The Thematic Working Group on Water, Hygiene and Sanitation

The TWG on Water, Hygiene and Sanitation (list of members presented in page 4) focused its activities on several key issues: (1) defining the functions of health authorities in relation to the prevention and control of water related diseases; (2) promoting and improving the sustainable management of water supplies; (3) raising political awareness and support for increased investment in sanitation and hygiene; and (4) harmonizing existing monitoring and reporting activities on water supply and sanitation coverage.

Health authorities should strengthen their capacity to advocate for increased investment and policy development in the water supply and sanitation sector.



Source: Workshop on Health Authorities' Functions in Water, Hygiene and Sanitation, March 2009, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

The Results

Functions of health authorities: The TWG WHS convened an important workshop, hosted by the Ministry of Health of Malaysia and supported by USAID, on functions of health authorities in relation to water related diseases; and published a discussion document on this subject. Strong emphasis was placed on health authorities' functions in advocacy and policy development directed towards environmental and social determinants of health, and founded on knowledge derived from research and analyses. The TWG WHS also reaffirmed health authorities' role in standard setting and hygiene promotion, noting a need to improve the effectiveness of hygiene promotion programmes in many countries through innovative approaches and partnerships.

Sustainable management of water supplies: With support from WHO, AusAID, USAID and others, health authorities collaborated with national water associations to conduct training, initiate demonstration projects, and develop national policies on safe drinking water in urban systems in China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Philippines and Vietnam. Water Safety

Plans were promoted as practical risk management tools to protect the quality of drinking water. The Ministry of Health of Malaysia initiated action towards developing guidelines on Water Safety Plans for rural systems. Through a workshop supported by the National Institute of Public Health (Japan), the International Water Association, WHO and USAID, the TWG WHS established linkages with the global Operations and Maintenance Network (OMN) to collaborate in future to improve the operations and maintenance of water supply and sanitation facilities in the member countries. The Ministry of Health, Lao PDR, hosted the workshop.

Raising awareness on sanitation and hygiene: The Philippines Department of Health led the planning and organization of the 2nd East Asia Ministerial Conference on Sanitation and Hygiene wherein 13 Southeast and East Asian countries pledged to meet the MDG target for sanitation, adopt sustainable sanitation and hygiene policies, and facilitate regional collaboration for training and sharing of information. The TWG WHS supported the conference by conducting a survey of its member countries and preparing a regional

situation analysis. The Manila Declaration on Sanitation and Hygiene in East Asia requests the Regional Forum on Environment and Health in Southeast and East Asia, to mandate the TWG WHS to act as the regional platform for facilitating cooperation towards the improvement of sanitation and hygiene, to collaborate with Indonesia in planning and organizing EASAN3 in 2012, and to support the planning and implementation of follow up actions.

Harmonizing monitoring and reporting activities: WHO, in collaboration with Unicef and with financial support from USAID, supported inter-sectoral activities in Philippines and Vietnam aimed at strengthening national sector monitoring systems and harmonizing national methodologies with international best practices. National sector assessment processes were also launched in both countries, based on the joint WHO/Unicef water supply and sanitation sector assessment guidelines. Plans were drawn up to launch similar activities in Lao PDR in the near future.

Conclusions

- Unsafe drinking water, poor hygiene practices and especially lagging progress towards the MDG target for sanitation all pose significant risks for transmission of water-related illnesses, together being responsible for 150,000 deaths per year in Southeast and East Asian countries.
- Among the member countries of the Regional Forum, about 800 million people lack access to improved sanitation facilities.

At current rates of progress, the countries as a whole will fall short of the 2015 MDG sanitation target by 6%.

- There is a need to accelerate progress towards the MDG target for sanitation while improving hygiene practices and maintaining progress toward the MDG target for safe drinking water.
- There is a need in many countries to establish a clear understanding and consensus of the functions of

health authorities as inter-sectoral partners in the water supply and sanitation sector.

- Monitoring and evaluating progress towards water supply and sanitation targets alike, is compromised by weak sector monitoring systems in many countries and lack of harmonized approaches between countries for sector monitoring and assessment.

Recommendations

- Health authorities should strengthen their capacity to advocate for increased investment and policy reforms in the water supply and sanitation sector, based on knowledge derived from research. Health authorities should maintain their traditional role in setting environmental standards and improve the effectiveness of hygiene promotion programmes.
- Health and environment authorities should promote the adoption of Water Safety Plans in urban and rural systems alike, as risk management tools to improve drinking water quality. Effective operations and maintenance practices are indispensable requirements to achieve safe drinking water. The TWG WHS should collaborate with the Government of Indonesia in planning and organizing EASAN3 in 2012 and support follow up activities. The TWG WHS should act as the regional platform for facilitating cooperation among Southeast and East Asian countries toward the improvement of sanitation and hygiene.
- Southeast and East Asian countries should strengthen national sector monitoring systems and sector assessment processes and harmonize national systems with international best practices in order to facilitate monitoring and evaluation at regional level

Footnotes

¹ TWG WHS & WHO, 2010. *Sanitation and Hygiene in East Asia*, published by WHO, Manila.

² WHO & UNICEF, 2008. *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation: Special Focus on Sanitation*, New York.

Available at: http://www.wssinfo.org/40_MDG2008.html

³ UNICEF & WHO, 2009. *Diarrhoea: Why children are still dying and what can be done*, New York: United Nations Children's Fund.

Air Quality Thematic Working Group Members

CO-CHAIR

Institute for Environmental Health and Related Product Safety, Chinese Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, China

MEMBERS

- Water Services Department, Public Works Department, Ministry of Development, Brunei Darussalam
- Ministry of Rural Development, Cambodia
- MOE, Key Lab of Environment and Health, School of Public Health, Tongji Medical College, Huazhong University of Science and Technology, China
- National Institute of Public Health, Japan
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REGIONAL & INTERNATIONAL PARTNERS

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- WHO CC for Environmental Health Impact Assessment, Curtin University Perth Western Australia, Australia
- International Lake Environment Committee Foundation (ILEC)
- WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia
- WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Division of Technology, Industry and Economics (DTIE), International Environmental Technology Centre (IETC)
- UNEP Regional Office for Asia and Pacific (ROAP) and UNEP Regional Resource Centre for Asia Pacific (RRC.AP)