

# THE ENVIRONMENT

## Access versus the privatization of resources

Fair access to natural resources is essential for sustainable development. In Millennium Development Goal number 7 there is a call to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and to achieve significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020. Although more people now have access to drinking water, in 2010 an estimated 215 million still will not. The situation is critical, and the growing trend towards privatizing the service and commercializing this essential resource will lead to even more inequality.

Social Watch Research Team<sup>1</sup>

### Selected indicators:

- People with access to improved water sources (%)
- People with access to sanitation (%)

The importance of people's habitat and adequate standards of life have been analyzed and stressed at various international conferences under the auspices of the United Nations and in human rights instruments.

These dimensions of people's quality of life must be approached with an integrated focus because they are connected to other aspects like access to health services, water, sanitary facilities, and decent housing. Governments are under a series of obligations, laid down in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to meet standards that will enable the people of their countries to have a decent life. These standards or values assumed by a society have also been accepted at international conferences like the Copenhagen Summit and the Beijing Conference, and the commitments have been enshrined in the Millennium Declaration and quantified in Goal 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

There are other dimensions that are interconnected with these commitments, like the links between habitat and health, habitat and poverty, and habitat and discrimination.

It is clear that poverty is very closely linked to discrimination, but within population sectors that suffer from discrimination – including indigenous groups, people of African descent, migrants and the homeless – very often the women suffer from double or even triple discrimination. In order to combat this there have to be specific policies for women geared to providing them with improved access to drinking water, sanitary facilities and housing as a basic structural foundation for complying with all the other commitments that countries have made, including those that have to do with reducing poverty, providing work, and children's and reproductive health (MDGs 1, 4 and 5).

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In the 1990s the United Nations called several international conferences to tackle different aspects of sustainable development. In 2000 a series of indicators were set so as to facilitate implementation of the MDGs. These would allow for evaluation of the progress made towards MDG 7, which connects access to water and sanitary facilities with sustainable development, the environment and land. This Goal also links these variables together in that it maintains a focus on urban and land development, habitat, access to drinking water and slum settlements. The Goal includes a call for the proportion of people without access to drinking water to be cut by half, and for a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020.

On this last point, it should be borne in mind that the urban population is growing fast and this is having a big impact on the environment. What makes this even more serious is that over 70% of the urban population in poor countries live in slum settlements and do not have adequate access to drinking water, sanitary facilities or other essential services.

It is very difficult to measure countries' real progress or regression with respect to goals that are fixed internationally because only data about access to drinking water and sanitation are available. There are no complete and up-to-date data available internationally to be able to monitor what percentage of populations have secure access to land tenancy, and analysis of housing quality is still in its early stages.

The seventh of the Millennium Development Goals requires governments to reduce the numbers of people living in slum settlements, but it is extremely difficult to systematize the information available so as to construct relative indicators of the quality of life in these settlements, access to services, quality of housing or the displacement of population groups.

This report will focus on indicators for which data is available so as to try to shed some light on the world situation as regards access to water and sanitary facilities.

Access to water is a basic human right, and according to UNICEF the amount needed to meet the basic needs of one child is 20 litres per day, which is equivalent to two buckets of water. UNICEF has reported that more than one billion people are still using water that is not fit for consumption, and more than 2.6 billion (40% of the world's population) lack basic sanitary facilities. As a result, thousands of children are dying from diarrhoea and other illnesses connected to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Some 4,000 children die every day simply because they do not have access to drinking water.

In 2002 the United Nations Human Rights Committee passed General Observation No. 15,<sup>2</sup> which recognizes the right to water as an indispensable factor for human dignity, and links this basic right to life and health. Polluted water and lack of access to adequate sanitary facilities are directly linked to illnesses, which means they amount to a violation of the human right to health. Access to this resource is so important that the General Assembly of the United Nations passed a resolution proclaiming the period 2005-2015 as the "International Decade for Action: Water for Life". The aim of this initiative is to reach the targets that have been agreed internationally and to lay the foundations to be able to make real progress in the years ahead.<sup>3</sup>

According to UN-Habitat, between 1990 and 2002 some 1.1 billion more people gained access to potable water, which raised global coverage from 77% to 83%. However, in spite of what has been achieved, it is estimated that the number of people without such access will double from 108 million to 215 million in the 1990-2010 period.<sup>4</sup>

This situation is further complicated by the fact that globalization has accelerated the trend towards privatizing essential services such as water. In some countries more than half the urban population has to depend on private companies for their water, and this is usually more expensive than public supplies.<sup>5</sup>

Civil society organizations have called on the international water forums to oppose this commercialization on the grounds that private companies do not allow universal access to this resource and this constitutes a violation of a basic human right. They also claim that the privatization of water services involves very serious human, social and environmental costs.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The Committee for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. General Observation No. 15 (2002), "The right to water" (Articles 11 and 12 of the International Charter on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights). Geneva, 11-29 November, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations. World Water Day. "Water as the source of life, 2005-2015". Available at: <[www.un.org/spanish/events/waterday/2005/](http://www.un.org/spanish/events/waterday/2005/)>.

<sup>4</sup> UN-Habitat (2006). *State of the World's Cities 2006/7: The Millennium Goals and Urban Sustainability*.

<sup>5</sup> UN-Habitat (2003). *Water and Sanitation in the World's Cities: Local Action for Global Goals*.

<sup>6</sup> Joint Declaration by the Movement for the Defence of Water. Mexico City, 19 March, 2006.

Discrimination in access to water is not just a matter of socio-economic level, but also involves where people live. According to the World Health Organization, approximately 80% of those who do not have access to drinking water live in poverty in rural areas, and this means they are less able to apply political pressure or to claim their rights. What's more, the time it takes them to collect water is time they cannot spend on productive activities, education or family care.<sup>7</sup>

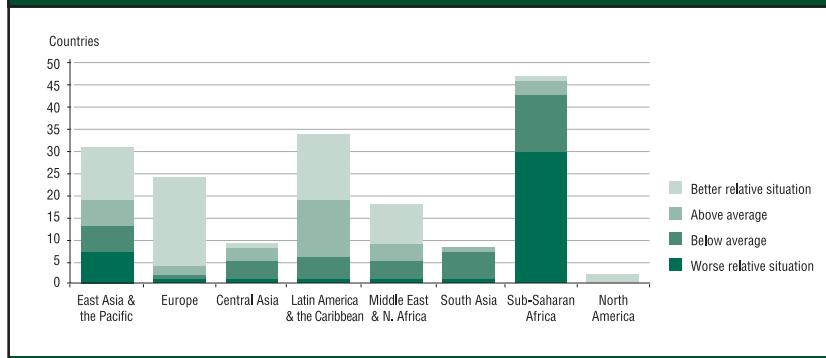
Another dimension to this problem is gender discrimination. The fact that there is discrimination in access to land, to the means of production and to potable water means that very often rural women have to leave their homes. Most displaced women have children, and they gravitate to areas where they can survive on the outskirts of cities, swelling still more the number of people living in slum settlements.

As if these structural circumstances were not bad enough, the situation of poor people is often further blighted by more transitory phenomena like armed conflicts and natural disasters, and this calls for an extra effort on the part of national governments and the international community to honour the commitments they have made.

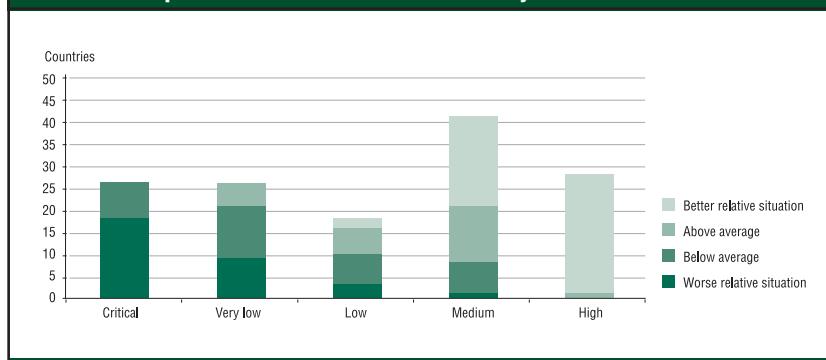
These problems are not always rooted in a lack of resources. In 2005 the United States was plunged into a major crisis affecting the safety and health of large numbers of people when Hurricane Katrina devastated the city of New Orleans. A sizeable percentage of the population of this city was living below the poverty line;<sup>8</sup> these were mostly African Americans who were poor and did not have the means to escape when the disaster struck. Not enough shelters were provided, and these refugees lacked drinking water, decent sanitation and other basic services, and were plunged into a grim, large-scale humanitarian crisis right in the heart of the richest country in the world.

In the developed countries access to water and sanitary facilities is not universal but on average it stands at over 90%, and this is a far cry indeed from the situation in the developing countries. The amount of water consumed per person also varies widely. In the rich countries, average daily consumption is between 500 and 800 litres, but in the poor countries it is between 60 and 150 litres.<sup>9</sup>

**CHART 1. Current situation of environmental indicators by regions**



**CHART 2. Final position in environmental indicators by BCI**



The official international statistics that Social Watch publishes show that in 150 countries for which data is available, 22% are in a worse relative situation, 25% are below average, 18% are above the average and 35% are in a better relative situation.

When we compare the countries in the worse relative situation and those in the better relative situation with the Basic Capabilities Index (BCI) constructed by Social Watch, it can be seen that most of the countries in the worse relative situation have a critical or very low BCI rating, and most of the countries in this category are in sub-Saharan Africa.

One country that stands out for the wrong reasons is Romania. It ranks 65th on the BCI but has very poor rates of coverage as regards drinking water and sanitary facilities, with access below 58% for both services.

Most of the countries in the better relative situation – that is to say those that have better rates of access to these resources – rate middle or high on the BCI. There are two exceptions, Egypt and the Cook Islands, which rank low on the BCI but are in the better relative situation category.

Ethiopia and Chad have the worst national coverage as regards sanitary facilities. In both countries access is below 10%, they have not made sig-

nificant progress for a decade (the 1990-2002 period), and in fact, in Ethiopia, coverage was actually less in 2002 than in 1990.

When it comes to an analysis by regions we find that most of the countries in Europe and North America have the best averages for coverage, and the worst situation is in sub-Saharan Africa where the figures for coverage are critical.

The countries that regressed the most as regards coverage of sanitary facilities were Liberia and Burundi, which both fell by more than ten percentage points in the last decade, and less than 40% of the population now have access. At the other end of the scale Myanmar made the greatest progress in sanitary facilities over the period: coverage increased from 21% in 1990 to 73% in 2002.

Mauritania, Kiribati, Haiti, Benin and Madagascar are all in a very critical situation according to the Basic Capabilities Index but they have made the most progress in extending coverage of sanitary facilities, although overall coverage is still very low.

The countries that regressed most in terms of providing drinking water were the Maldives, the Marshall Islands and Algeria. In all three people's access fell by around ten percentage points, and in the Maldives the situation is serious because in 1990

7 World Health Organization (WHO) (2003). *The right to water*. Available at: <[www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/rwrev.pdf](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/rwrev.pdf)>.

8 UNESCO (2006). *Water, a shared responsibility. The UN World Water Development Report 2*. Chapter 1: "Living in a Changing World". Available at: <[www.unesco.org/water/wwdr/wwdr2/pdf/wwdr2\\_ch\\_1.pdf](http://www.unesco.org/water/wwdr/wwdr2/pdf/wwdr2_ch_1.pdf)>. According to the report, in 1999 some 28% of the inhabitants of New Orleans were living below the poverty line.

9 UN-Habitat (2006), *op cit*.

some 99% of the population had access to potable water but coverage fell to 84% in 2002.

Namibia, Benin and the Central African Republic have very low rankings on the BCI but have managed to improve water coverage. The Central African Republic made the most progress with an increase in national coverage from 48% in 1990 to 75% in 2002.

For the total of 135 countries for which data are available, 59 have not progressed or have stagnated, and most of these are countries in the better situation. They have already achieved high coverage in this respect (on average above 95%), but they have not progressed in spite of the fact that they have made international commitments to attain total coverage in water and sanitary facilities.

Half the countries have improved in this area, with 35 making slight progress and 32 significant progress. Nevertheless, an alarmingly high number of people in the world are still living without adequate water or sanitary facilities, and not only is this linked to illnesses among children and adults, but it also has a severe long-term negative impact on national development and the conditions of daily life. ■

**TABLE 1. Current situation by evolution in environmental indicators**

CURRENT SITUATION	SIGNIFICANT REGRESSION	SLIGHT REGRESSION	STAGNATION	SLIGHT PROGRESS	SIGNIFICANT PROGRESS	TOTAL
Countries in worse situation	0	4	4	11	8	27
Countries below average	1	0	4	11	15	31
Countries above average	0	1	6	10	7	24
Countries in better situation	0	3	45	3	2	53
Total	1	8	59	35	32	135

**TABLE 2. Averages by environmental indicator of countries in better and worse situation**

CURRENT SITUATION		POPULATION WITH ACCESS TO SANITATION (%)	POPULATION WITH ACCESS TO IMPROVED WATER SOURCES (%)
Countries in worse situation	Average	30.86	54.17
	Number of countries	42	42
Countries in better situation	Average	95.96	97.55
	Number of countries	50	58
Total of countries	Average	66.24	79.33
	Number of countries	92	100