

Problem of waste too often neglected

Lacking toilets and clean water, poor fall ill in 'silent' crisis overlooked by donors

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The first time George Yap walked through the back alleys of Kibera, a teeming slum outside Nairobi, Kenya, he was up to his ankles in trouble.

"I had no idea where I was going, and suddenly there was a deluge of rain," said the Ottawa-based program director of the charity WaterCan.

"Next thing I knew I was walking through a river of human sewage," he said.

But the revolting experience, says Yap, was "the best thing that could have happened to me in terms of understanding the problems of the world's worst slums. This is the way much of the world lives."

Like other parts of Africa, where people have no access to sanitation, the Kibera slum dwellers use "flying toilets" to dispose of body wastes – plastic bags dumped each morning in open sewers or pits. Floods shred the bags and turn the streets into gigantic toilets.

The result is a vicious circle of contamination, sickness, and reinfection of those who recover from water-borne disease.

So dire is the problem that tomorrow the United Nations will launch the International Year of Sanitation 2008, focusing on boosting sanitation in developing countries where children and adults are doomed by diseases spread by human excrement.

And, Yap says, Canada and other wealthy countries could do much more to help.

In a letter to Prime Minister Stephen Harper, an umbrella group of aid organizations called Sanitation and Water Action Network Canada calls for support to meet the UN goal of, by 2015, halving the number of people without access to clean water and sanitation.

"Currently sanitation and water-related projects represent 2 per cent (approximately \$70 million) of CIDA's annual disbursements, and only a portion

of that goes directly to providing clean water and sanitation to the world's poorest people," says the letter.

Estimates say that \$10 billion a year is needed to provide basic sanitation around the globe within two decades – less than 1 per cent of annual world military spending.

Yet aid groups know that sanitation attracts little attention from donors, who fail to see it as a permanent health crisis.

A report from the UN's development program calls it a "silent emergency" that kills 1.8 million children a year from preventable diarrhea.

Almost 50 per cent of all people in developing countries suffer from health problems caused by lack of water and sanitation, it adds. More than 440 million school days are lost to water-related illness.

In rural areas of poor countries, soil is contaminated by human waste, which is tracked into shelters where people live.

In mountainous countries like Nepal, only the highest elevations have clear water, and rivers are running sewers by the time they reach the plains.

Some of the worst-off areas are crowded slums, which have neither open space for waste disposal nor basic urban services like running water.

"People are desperate, so there are a lot of illegal water connections," says Yap.

"The local mafia will drill into the municipal mains and follow the pipelines. But they won't use proper pipes, which are expensive. Often there's a whole configuration of garden hoses, which are easy to contaminate."

Health services and nutrition programs alone won't help the poor improve their lives, he points out. "At the end of the day, proper sanitation is needed if you want to alleviate poverty. Even if you supply nutritious food and vaccines, without toilets you won't get the results you want."

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