

HOW THE POOR SUFFER

WATER for ALL

WATER BRIEFS

Water and Poverty

The poor are hardest hit by water-related problems that threaten their survival. Today, one in three Asians does not have access to a safe drinking water source within 200 meters of home, while one in two Asians does not have adequate water and sanitation. Water --or the lack of it -- affects the poor in a number of ways.

On the Margins of Agriculture

In Asia's countryside, salinization resulting from an overuse of water and poorly conceived irrigation, and aquifer depletion have rendered once-fertile lands in India, Pakistan, and Central Asia useless, driving small and marginal farmers into poverty.

Widespread water pollution has also resulted in increased water scarcity; poorer public health; lower agricultural yields; and a declining quality of aquatic life in lakes, rivers, and coastal waters.

Often landless, the poor farm marginally productive areas. Forests are depleted, biodiversity is lost, catchment areas deteriorate, flooding is frequent, and groundwater recharge is diminished. Farm livelihoods, including those of the poor, become precarious, which helps further entrench the cycle of poverty.

The Search for Irrigation

Marginal farmers often till lands on the periphery of irrigation facilities. In many parts of the People's Republic of China, India, Pakistan, and Thailand, they are at the tail end of the water distribution system and almost never able reliably to access water. Low productivity and crop failures create food insecurity; uncertain incomes perpetuate indebtedness; and social misery is compounded.

Sourcing Water

In the remote hills of Nepal and parts of the mountainous regions of the Greater Mekong subregion, many poor communities are compelled to fetch water from sources up to 15 kilometers away. Tradition requires that women and female children carry water over long distances. Physical deformities are common; human dignity suffers acutely; and children are deprived of the opportunity to attend school.

Water and Poverty in the Cities

Many of the urban poor's water needs are met by vendors, who are sometimes operating illegally. These vendors provide water of a questionable quality at significantly higher prices than more privileged sections of the community are paying for piped water.

In India, the poor are often confined to water consumption levels below 15 liters per capita per day compared with the better off who consume up to 300 liters per capita per day. The environmental hazards of poor sanitation and water pollution affect the urban poor more severely than others. The inequity is harsh -- the poor have less time to spend on productive work, fall sick more often, and spend more on getting well.

Small Islands

Seasonal shortages of potable water in the Pacific islands are chronic. In the Kiribati capital of South Tarawa, with its fast-growing population, the city has only a 1-hour supply of questionable quality drinking water each day.

People, particularly the poor, incur high costs in fetching water. Coconut water is often used to quench thirst. Poor water quality and associated health problems are a major concern in the Pacific region.

Water and Health

The pollution of water bodies increases the incidence of waterborne diseases in both rural and urban areas. Morbidity and mortality have increased, as has the impact on productivity and incomes. Poor nutrition reflects problems with water for food production. A major health problem, poor nutrition makes the poor even more susceptible to disease.

Many parasites and carriers of disease, such as mosquitoes, live in water. This particularly affects the poor -- especially the young -- with 2.2 million children dying every year from waterborne diseases.

Water and Floods

The vast majority of the millions of Asians affected annually by floods are the poor. They live where no one else will build, often in places with the certainty of annual flooding. Floods deny the poor the opportunity to break out of the poverty cycle. In addition, floods often cause marginally better-off people to descend into poverty as a result of flood-related losses.

In Bangladesh, the major floods of 1988, 1998, and 2004 caused significant damage and loss of life. Even less devastating floods are a yearly feature of the monsoon. In July 2002, at least 110 people died from flooding in Bangladesh, a third of them from diarrhea caused by polluted water.

New approaches to managing floods, rather than attempting to control them, offer hope of improving the outlook for people living in flood-prone areas.