

Meeting the sanitation MDG target in Asia-Pacific – a lost hope or a potential reality?

● A concerted culture change is key to meeting sanitation targets in the Asia-Pacific region. **JULIET WILLETTS, NAOMI CARRARD** and **CYNTHIA MITCHELL** outline the challenge.

Sanitation in the Asia-Pacific is in crisis and requires greater focus by AusAID, other bilateral donors, the international water industry and multilateral agencies.

A recent report prepared by the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology, Sydney, for WorldVision Australia and WaterAid Australia draws attention to the lagging progress in sanitation and identifies the additional efforts required to address the crisis.

What is still missing in AusAID and others' approach is a concerted analysis of the challenges and a clear strategy for how to address the political, institutional and social issues that hinder provision.

The report argues that widespread lack of political will and priority for sanitation must be addressed through dialogue with regional partner governments. Dialogue needs to focus on the need for national sanitation plans or policies to fill this policy gap which exists in the majority of countries in the region. Equally important is advocacy for allocation of specific funds for sanitation rather than funds for 'water and sanitation' which are inevitably mostly spent on water. Without greater political will, the process of scaling-up the many successful small-scale sanitation initiatives conducted by NGOs and other organisations to reach the

enormous numbers of people without access will remain elusive. The upcoming inaugural *East Asia Sanitation and Hygiene Ministerial Conference* in China in November is a first step to engage senior government officials and Ministers in the debate on the importance and enormity of the challenge at hand.

In national governments a real problem is that sanitation often lacks a departmental home. If advances are to be made it will be critical to ensure that a lead role on the issue is given to one of the multiple departments with some responsibility for sanitation (eg health, infrastructure, environment).

Donor funding agencies face a similar problem in this respect, with a lack of an institutional home for sanitation undermining their ability to focus attention on the issue. For instance AusAID includes sanitation in its water policy but the policy document does not give priority to sanitation nor offer any guidance on how sanitation issues should be dealt with. The UK's Department for International Development (DFID) is addressing this issue by situating sanitation within the health area.¹

Another institutional issue that hinders progress in the Asia-Pacific is widespread decentralisation. In many places this has left local and regional authorities tasked with sanitation but without critically needed support for

capacity building to deliver these services.

Socio-cultural issues are at the heart of the sanitation crisis. Target communities often attach little value to sanitation as either a public or a private good and individuals and communities frequently demonstrate a lack of commitment to invest in improvements. Sanitation aid projects often fail to actually change behaviours so that even when toilets are constructed, they are little or never used. The latest projects in Indonesia follow a successful approach developed in Bangladesh called 'community-led total sanitation' that focuses on collective behaviour change. Another successful approach used in Tuvalu in the Pacific addressed cultural factors through an in-depth engagement with communities about the use of composting toilets, addressing their acceptability and associated gender issues with community members. Linking cultural and social-change experts with technical experts will be crucial to shifting the current situation forward.

While we ignore these challenges and continue to invest in health care systems and other symptomatic aid relief, 185 million people in South East Asia and the Pacific remain without access to the safe sanitation² that might prevent them from sickness in the first place. In the 22 developing countries in this region, each year sees approximately 80,000 children under five die from diarrhoea,³ directly linked to lack of such basic facilities.

In some countries, such as Cambodia, progress is almost negligible. Based on current progress the country will not come close to meeting either the water or sanitation Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Progress towards the sanitation target is particularly poor (Figure 1). With an 81% rural population just 8% of people have access to sanitation (Figure 2) – the lowest, in Asia.

In South East Asia and the Pacific it is estimated that the cost to achieve the

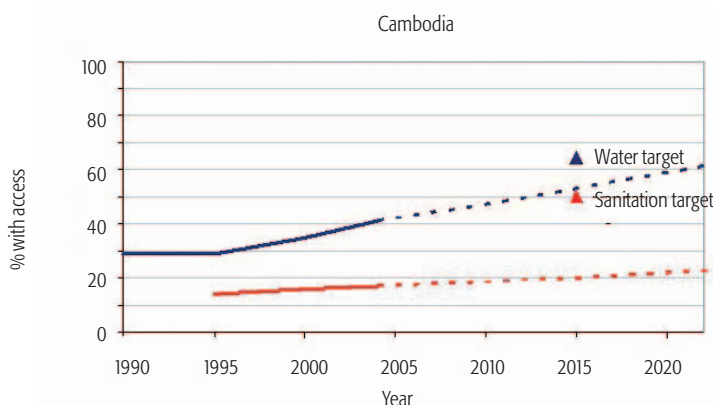


Figure 1
Progress towards water and sanitation MDGs in Cambodia

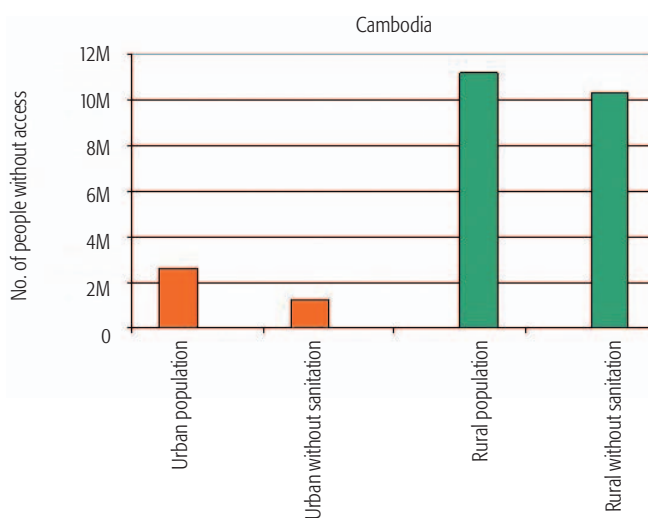
Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program. All figures are 2004 data.

MDG water and sanitation targets is US\$5.1 billion annually, of which \$1.7 billion would need to be aid.⁴ But the average current annual water and sanitation ODA investment is less than half this at around US\$640 million.⁵ In this pool, Australia's contribution is lagging but there are promising signs of increased attention to the sector. The Australian ODA budget is set to double over the next four years and commitments to an Infrastructure for Growth Initiative and a new Environment Strategy will serve to increase funding for essential services. A new AusAID research strategy also has the potential to provide the necessary analytical basis to guide future investments. These are at least positive indications of moves in the right direction.

With next year marked as the International Year of Sanitation, the water industry in Australia and elsewhere can also contribute. Whether it be through organisations like WaterAid Australia, through AusAID or other donors, through the IWA *Sanitation21* group or other means, we each share a responsibility to assist in addressing the injustice of the current sanitation situation in the Asia Pacific region and elsewhere. ●

Figure 2
People without access to sanitation in urban and rural Cambodia

Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program. All figures are 2004 data.



References

1. House of Commons International Development Committee (2007) *Sanitation and Water, Sixth Report of Session 2006-7, Volume 1 Report, together with formal minutes, HC 126-1, Published 26 April 2007 by authority of the House of Commons, London, 79 Pages.*
2. WHO/UNICEF (2004) *Joint Monitoring Program.*
3. UNICEF (2006) *State of the World's Children Report*
4. Based on figures from the UNDP 2006 *Human Development Report*
5. Figures from OECD DAC CRS database accessed 18 Feb 2007

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'Getting the basics right: water and sanitation in South East Asia and the Pacific' is available at: http://www.isf.uts.edu.au/publications/Getting_the_basics_right.pdf.