

For world's poor, water is a killer

ANDY RIGA, The Gazette
Saturday, November 24, 2007

"Any idea what a 'flying toilet' is?" George Yap asks.

"People defecate in plastic bags in the middle of the night then just toss them. The next morning you see bags of crap sitting on the road, in ditches, on roofs, behind bushes."

Yap is describing a trip to Kibera, a cramped, sprawling Kenyan shanty town whose residents are among the 1.2 billion people without safe water and 2.6 billion people without basic sanitation around the world.

One of Africa's biggest slums with 700,000 residents, Kibera is a microcosm of the global water crisis, the flying toilet a symbol of desperation.

Women often use plastic bags as toilets at night, fearing attacks if they use the open-pit latrines that serve as communal toilets, one for every 200 people.

"The bags keep the pathogens in the feces," says Yap, program director of WaterCan, a Canadian charity that funds toilet, drinking-water and hygiene-education projects in east Africa.

"It's warm, moist, in the sun; the pathogens, the disease-causing agents, last longer, and their ability to infect and cause health problems are extended." Children come in contact with bags; some of the bags end up in ditches whose water is used for bathing and clothes washing.

The contents of Kibera's latrines sometimes penetrate the water table. In heavy rain, they overflow, spilling feces and urine on to roads and into ditches that serve as the slum's sewage canals.

Buckets used to collect ditch water and to bail contaminated water out of flooded homes sometimes double as drinking-water containers.

No wonder typhoid, dysentery and diarrhea plague the slum's children.

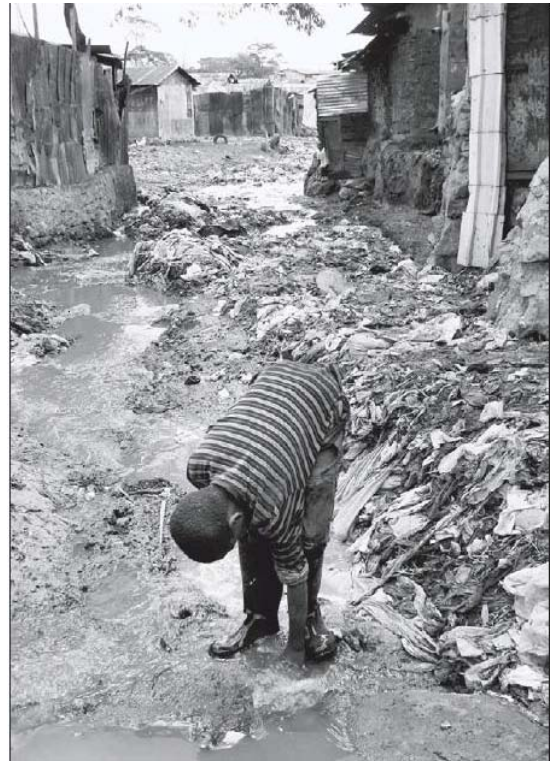


Photo: Thomas Mukoya, Reuters

The Kibera slum in Kenya is a microcosm of the global water crisis. Above, a boy searches for recyclable materials in a polluted stream.

Every year, 1.8 million children die of diseases caused by poor sanitation and dirty water in developing countries, dwarfing casualties associated with violent conflicts, the United Nations says.



Kibera's drinking-water situation is also bleak. Residents buy contaminated water from the local "water mafia" at inflated prices. Or they walk for up to an hour, wait in line for water for several hours, then lug it home. As in many water-deprived communities, most Kibera water collectors are female, keeping girls out of school and women away from more productive work.

Climate change is expected to aggravate the developing world's dire sanitation and drinking water situation, reducing supplies in water-stressed areas and causing more extreme weather. Some experts predict massive refugee movements and wars over water.

Many of the world's current water problems are caused by droughts, the population boom, and a general dearth of water in densely populated areas. Asia, for example, is home to 60 per cent of the world's population, but only 36 per cent of the world's water.

But "the scarcity at the heart of the global water crisis is rooted in power, poverty and inequality, not in physical availability," according to the UN's 2006 Human Development Report.

"There is more than enough water in the world for domestic purposes, for agriculture and for industry." But when it comes to clean water, the poorest "get less, pay more and bear the brunt of the human development costs associated with scarcity."

Slum dwellers in big cities in Indonesia, the Philippines and Kenya, for example, pay five to 10 times more for water than those in high-income areas of their own cities, the report said.

But there are some success stories. In a slum of Karachi, Pakistan, improvements in sanitation have helped bring about a drop in infant mortality from 130 deaths per 1,000 births in the 1980s to fewer than 40 per 1,000 births.

In 2000, UN members pledged to cut in half the proportion of people without access to safe water and sanitation by 2015. But if current trends continue, sub-Saharan Africa will only reach the safe-water target in 2040 and the sanitation target in 2076.

Canada should be doing more to help, says Sanitation and Water Action Network Canada, a coalition of non-governmental agencies that includes Oxfam, CARE and Water for People.

Today, about two per cent of the \$3.7 billion Canada spends on international aid goes to sanitation and water-related projects, the coalition says. It argues investing in more such projects would pay big dividends, reducing deaths and disease and making it easier for children to get an education and adults to improve their circumstances.

Water Resources Online

Environment Canada Freshwater site: www.ec.gc.ca/water

St. Lawrence Centre: www.qc.ec.gc.ca/csl/

Gordon Water Group: www.gordonwatergroup.org

The Waterhole: www.thewaterhole.ca

UN Human Development Reports: <http://hdr.undp.org>

SWAN Canada: www.swanCanada.org

© The Gazette (Montreal) 2007