Editorial

Water for all: a human right

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Despite the achievements of the 1980s - an additional 1600 million people were served with safe water supplies - an estimated 1200 million people in developing countries still do not have proper access to safe water. They are at constant risk of contracting water- and sanitation-related diseases. The upsurge of cholera since 1990 has underlined the need for clean water to protect health, particularly in the expanding shanties and slums in and around the cities of developing countries.

Governments and the international community are clearly willing to take up the challenge of Water for All at various international forums. The UN General Assembly in December 1990 recognized that both national efforts and international cooperation must now be intensified.

An adequate quantity of water, by itself, is not enough to safeguard health. Unsafe water supplies lead directly to diseases that affect hundreds of millions of people, mainly living in the tropics. This issue of World Health describes some of the problems and what is being done about them.

An accessible and safe water supply, improved personal and domestic hygiene, and stronger community participation are the main ways to avoid water-borne diseases. But to be really effective they must be accompanied by other measures such as pollution control and proper drainage of surface waters. Since environmental protection of fresh water sources is the basic step to ensure a sustainable clean water supply, this must always be an integral component of both environment and health programmes.

The people now unserved do not represent the full challenge. Because of the high rates of population increase in developing countries, an additional 890 million people - not yet born - will need to have access to safe water by the year 2000, raising the figure of people in need to almost 2500 million, of whom almost 40% will be urban poor.

Water is a basic human need for health - indeed, for survival - and therefore it is not an exaggeration to call it one of the basic human rights. Without safe water and sanitation, there is no real development. A community ravaged by diarrhoeal diseases, dracunculiasis or schistosomiasis cannot look beyond its immediate problems towards social and economic welfare. Safe water is the doorway to health and health is the prerequisite for progress, social equity and human dignity.

Let us make the 1990s the years when all countries and the international community, working together, will aim to provide all the peoples of the world with enough water for their needs.