

Speech by David Heymann, Assistant-Director General of WHO, at the launch of the  
Global Sanitation Fund in Geneva, 14 March 2008

Dear colleagues;

Firstly, I would like to express sincere congratulations to our partner organization the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council for their notable effort in launching the Global Sanitation Fund.

As the host Agency, we fully support this initiative, and are honoured to be able to host it. We believe there is an increasing need to scale-up investment in the sanitation sector, as it has long been the 'orphan' at the international policy high table, whose voice remains unheard.

In November 2007, the UN launched the International Year of Sanitation to draw urgent attention to this issue. 2.6 billion people currently lack adequate sanitation, including 980 million children under the age of 18. If current trends continue, 2.4 billion people will still be without basic sanitation in 2015. Of all the Millennium Development Goals, the target for sanitation is the furthest off track. Although efforts have been made, the situation is changing only slowly, and further action is needed to ensure sanitation and good hygiene for all.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I would now like to state some of the principal reasons why sanitation is crucial in preventing illnesses and improving the overall living conditions for many people, particularly the poor and marginalized:

- Lack of access to safe sanitation and unhygienic practices are the causes of many illnesses, such as diarrhoea, malaria and trachoma;
- People without access to safe water and adequate sanitation are the poorest and least powerful, living in the most deplorable conditions;
- Economic losses are greatest in some of the poorest countries. Sub-Saharan Africa loses about 5 per cent of GDP, or some US\$28 billion annually - a figure that exceeded total aid flows and debt relief to the region in 2003.
- Lack of adequate sanitation in schools particularly affects girls, who often miss school and do not keep up educationally with their peers.

Although efforts have been made to improve universal sanitation conditions, we are still faced with a clear lack of political support and insufficient donor coordination. It is therefore urgent to act jointly to reverse this situation.

We welcome the Global Sanitation Fund as a new addition to the UN Family. The resources it will provide are necessary to fill large gaps at country level and will accelerate progress towards the achievement of the MDGs. I would particularly like to thank our colleagues from the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council for their initiative to establish the fund and express our gratitude to key donors [Netherlands, Sweden, Switzerland] for supporting this new financing mechanism aiming to reach out to the neediest people.

We look forward to working with the WSSCC secretariat and the Steering Committee in building the foundation for the implementation of the Fund which we see as an important addition to the global activities to support the advance of sanitation as a critical public health intervention.

We have gained a great deal of experience with large global funds, such as GFATM and GAVI, in the past few years. These experiences will assist us in guiding the Council in establishing an effective and efficient working environment for the fund.

Lastly, I would like to take this opportunity to encourage multi-donor support which is crucial in attaining this objective and invite other donor agencies to join us in this initiative. I sincerely hope that the GSF will be successful.