

Speech by Jon Lane, Executive Director,  
Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council,  
at the World Water Day celebration, 20 March 2008, Geneva

Your Royal Highness, Directors-General, ladies and gentlemen,

The Martians have landed.

But don't worry, it's not an invasion, just a mother and her kids who have come to visit. It's true that they can see the Great Wall of China from their home so they thought they would come and have a look round our planet. Now they have, and they are resting just here on the Salève hill overlooking Geneva:

"That big wall was great!"

"And those neat bridges joining up all the little islands!"

"I liked the little cars and trains."

"But they can't even fly, the aeroplanes are much cooler."

"Oh, be quiet kids, eat your Earth Bars and give me a rest for a minute."

(pause)

"Mum, which species is it that has done all these cool things?"

"Well, you see the ones walking on two legs, with the fancy clothes, looking pleased with themselves. It's them. They think they know it all."

"Oh good, so can I go down and talk to them about galactiball and how to dematerialise better?"

"No dear, they're not that clever. But you can talk with them, they can't do you any harm. Just watch out for one odd thing about them."

"What's that, Mum?"

"They kill each other."

"Yuk, that's awful! Why do they do that?"

"I don't know why, but I do know how. Some of them use guns and bombs, which is terrible. But many more kill each other in a very odd way."

"How, Mum?"

"Well, I've been watching them. They put stuff called food in at the top, and stuff called shit comes out at the bottom."

"How odd, what's in the stuff called shit?"

"It is all the waste that their primitive bodies can't cope with, and it also contains millions of little things called germs that kill other people. So they leave this stuff lying around on the ground and other people - mainly kids, I'm sorry to tell you - get it all over their feet and hands, food and water, and so it kills them."

"Mum, you're pulling my antenna!"

"No, it's true."

"Do they do this all over the world?"

"Well, it is mainly in some places, but look even here in this place called Switzerland. The people look very smart and well-organised, they make beautiful things to wear on their wrists to tell the time - and they don't even need them, because they can tell the time by when the buses and trains leave. But look at the trains. As they go along, all the stuff called shit just falls underneath onto the ground. I looked inside, and they have little rooms with a hole in the floor that they just drop it through."

"Yuk, this is all disgusting. I don't think I want to talk with them after all. Can we just go home now?"

Ladies and gentlemen of the media, you are the Martian kids. You should be asking awkward questions.

As for the rest of us, we should be ready to answer your questions and to do everything we can to improve sanitation. Many of our colleagues around the world are using today's celebration of World Water Day to launch the International Year of Sanitation in their countries. The purpose of our meeting here is to support them. We have plenty of good new material for everybody to use to communicate the messages about sanitation – which the previous speakers have so clearly explained.

We at the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council are pleased to be part of this great forward momentum on sanitation. WSSCC has been through a bad patch but is growing again now and has made a strategic decision to concentrate its efforts on sanitation and hygiene. In particular we have just launched the Global Sanitation Fund (which the Prince described so clearly in his speech, although he was too modest to mention that the government of his country, The Netherlands, is the biggest initial contributor to the Global Sanitation Fund). It is the world's first fund specifically for sanitation and hygiene. But it is not setting up a new organisation or parallel structure – it is simply a part of WSSCC's work, hosted in WHO, that channels money to

organisations in developing countries to implement good quality work in accordance with national policies and priorities.

I know we have a big task ahead of us to achieve sanitation for everybody. But I believe we can achieve it, and this is how. I have four points:

1. Hard work. Doing sanitation well is difficult, combining social sciences and technical work. It is slow steady work, house by house, community by community. There is no substitute for hard work.

2. Plain speaking. We must speak out about the subject using plain language that everybody can understand. This will bring sanitation and toilets and shit into regular professional and policy dialogue.

3. Strong leadership. This is being demonstrated today, for example by the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation chaired previously by the late Mr. Hashimoto and now by HRH Prince Willem-Alexander of The Netherlands. Another example is the 32 Ministers from countries across Africa who gathered recently at the AfricaSan conference and made strong political commitments.

4, Creating demand. Successful sanitation is led by hygiene promotion, demand creation and raising sanitation up people's own priorities, not by centralised supply-driven programmes building subsidised toilets that people do not want.

Ladies and gentlemen, as our slogan for today says, 2.6 billion people want to use the toilet. We must not fail them.

When those Martian kids ask you what you did to help other people's sanitation, what will you say?