

Director-General Chan, Director-General
Ordzhonikidze, Your Excellencies, ladies and
gentlemen,

Sometimes I feel like a travelling minstrel, singing
the same song again and again.
Luckily for you I decided not to become one. To
my regret, I found out when I was very young that I
don't have a great voice.

So don't worry, I'll not be singing for you today.

But, ladies and gentlemen, I DO have the words
and I DO feel the need to tell my story. Repetition
breeds recognition, and recognition is what we
need to make people act. And that's why we have
to tell our story again and again. The story is not
about me, it is about 2.6 billion poor and vulnerable
people who lack adequate sanitation. It is on their
behalf we have to get the world moving.

That is why we are here today in Geneva to celebrate World Water Day 2008. I hope it will not be long before I can change my tune and we can sing another, much more cheerful song about sanitation, instead of the blues we sing now.

World Water Day is a special day, because we are drawing the world's attention to the problems of water and sanitation.

2008 is a special year: the UN has declared it the 'International Year of Sanitation'.

This year, I will travel around the world in my capacity as Chair of the UN Secretary General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, better known as UNSGAB, calling for action and, in particular, raising awareness of the sanitation crisis.

But, ladies and gentlemen, how many more special days, years and campaigns do we need before we genuinely take action? Would a contest help or a popular movie star to champion our cause?

The figures on water and sanitation are very worrying. Dr Chan has already shown them to us, so I will not repeat them. You and I know that if we continue at the current rate, the Millennium Development Goals on water and sanitation will not be met by 2015.

Last year I proposed changing the name of World Water Day to World Water Action Day. Did the world spring into action after that? Did we start concrete projects? Have we got results? Or are we still only talking?

Ladies and gentlemen, in this International Year of Sanitation, we need to emphasise that we have to

switch to action. The leaders of the world are the ones to act. But at national and local level too, people should get going.

One of UNSGAB's goals is to create awareness of the problems caused by lack of sanitation.

It truly upsets me that each day 7,500 people are still dying of water-related diseases because of the unhygienic conditions in which they live. And two thirds of those people are under five years old. We cannot accept that.

What makes it so difficult to accept is that many of these deaths could be prevented if we invested more in sanitation and clean drinking water. And it seems to me that we – you and I – must be held responsible if we make no effort to solve the sanitation crisis.

That's why I feel the need to step onto the stage and tell my story over again. We will fail in our intentions if we do not take concrete action now. These special days and years are pointless if they do not yield concrete results and outcomes. That is my message.

But, fortunately, ladies and gentleman, I am very happy to be able to tell you that significant progress has already been made. Since the launch of the International Year of Sanitation, in November last year, activities to improve access to and use of sanitary facilities are in full swing.

For example, one of our goals is to encourage all levels of government and all stakeholders to incorporate sanitation into their policies. We are already seeing some tangible results.

At the Africa Sanitation Conference in Durban last February, 35 African Ministers and Heads of Delegation pledged their full support and commitment to making an ultimate effort to achieve the millennium goals on sanitation. This was put down on paper in concrete agreements in the éThekwini Commitments on Sanitation and the AfricaSan Action Plan 2008-2010. The next step will be to have the éThekwini Commitments on Sanitation and the AfricaSan Action Plan 2008-2010 endorsed by the Heads of State at the AU Water and Sanitation Summit in Sharm el Sheikh, Egypt on June 30th.

Ladies and gentlemen, I see and feel that attention for the sanitation crisis is increasing worldwide. I am delighted to say that since the launch of the International Year of Sanitation, UNSGAB has been approached by governments and international organisations all over the world who are concerned

about the sanitation crisis and want to work with us to tackle it.

Meanwhile, we have been engaged in ministerial dialogues with Asia, Latin America and Africa. More and more people feel they are responsible and want to help. That is our aim, that is what we need to get the poor on the sanitation ladder. That's what they deserve. And maybe in the near future I can start writing a more cheerful song about sanitation.

Ladies and gentleman, Director-General Chan has already mentioned the many ways in which sanitation is directly related to public health. A survey of medical practitioners worldwide that was recently published in the British Medical Journal revealed that in their opinion sanitation and the discovery of its impact on public health was the greatest medical advance of the last 160 years.

Good health is the basis of human life. It is the basis we need to live our lives in dignity. And we need a healthy body and environment to be able to develop.

Clean water and sanitation are not only about hygiene and disease. If we invest in clean water and sanitation we invest in people and their social and economic development. Sanitation is about health, dignity and development. That is why in this International Year of Sanitation UNSGAB especially wants to focus on these three issues.

Ladies and gentlemen, the right to water and sanitation was recently discussed at the Human Rights Council here in Geneva. Recognition of the right to water is helpful because it focuses interventions on the poorest and most vulnerable people, combats discrimination against and

exclusion of certain groups and encourages people to stand up for their rights.

I sincerely hope that the Human Rights Council will soon reach a clear consensus on the right to water and sanitation, but recognition of that right is not enough. It is a first step towards more commitment, more money and more action. What really counts in the end is the implementation of sustainable projects in the field. Toilets, connections, improved sanitation for the poor, that's what we are really aiming at, not just another brick in the wall of good intentions. Get policymakers and opinion leaders out there to really understand what it means to live without basic sanitation, to open their eyes to something they cannot imagine in their own world.

I was very happy to hear of another initiative that was introduced last week in Geneva: the Global

Sanitation Fund, launched by the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) which is housed and supported by the WHO.

The Global Sanitation Fund is a financing mechanism that aims to raise awareness of and boost investments in sanitation and hygiene in accordance with national sanitation and hygiene policies. The Fund could mean a very important step forward because it offers all kinds of contributors (bilateral and multilateral aid organisations, commercial companies, charitable foundations and private individuals) an efficient and cost-effective opportunity to help the world's poorest people address their basic sanitation needs.

Ladies and gentlemen, many actions have already been taken or are under way, but we still have a long way to go to achieve MDG-7 Target 10. Your

active support, and that of many others is needed to solve the sanitation crisis.

Let us end this injustice and let us join forces, because ‘Sanitation for all’ also implies ‘All for sanitation’.

Improved sanitation is achievable. Let’s make it a reality and then we can write our sanitation song.

I promise I won’t join in the singing But I definitely will keep supporting and motivating you all and the rest of the world to take action for sanitation. I hope we’ll soon be singing a happier song!

Thank you.