

Interview Therese Dooley, Senior Advisor Sanitation and Hygiene, UNICEF, New York, USA

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Therese Dooley is a Senior Advisor Sanitation and Hygiene in UNICEF's Water, Environment and Sanitation Section in New York with a main focus on community-based sanitation and hygiene promotion.

So Therese, what is sanitation?

Sanitation is a system that protects people from human excreta. It involves hygiene and the safe removal of excreta such as toilets or latrines.

And why is it important for children?

It's particularly important to children because children live and play in the environment around the home. And they're very much prone to diarrhoea, worms and pneumonia and of course excreta is the major carrier of many of these pathogens. So diarrhoea contributes to about 17 percent of the 10 million children who die each year and improvements to sanitation can reduce those deaths by up to 88 percent. Worms also play a huge role. The worm load on children has a major impact on their cognitive development, on their nutritional status and basically on their general health. In addition I think sanitation is particularly important in education and particularly for girls because quite often girls aren't allowed to attend school or drop out of school early due to the fact that there's no sanitation facilities in the schools – particularly when they reach the age of puberty.

Why have the issues related to sanitation been neglected until now?

I think like AIDS was in the 1980s, sanitation is often a taboo subject in many countries. People are often afraid to discuss it in polite company; they feel it is something that shouldn't be openly discussed, and I think we now have a major opportunity to lift this taboo and talk openly about sanitation. It's a natural phenomenon, everybody has to use a latrine or a restroom or a bathroom every day. And why shouldn't we talk about it and ensure that people have dignity and privacy in what they do.

Current statistics and reports say that in many parts of the world, the sanitation-related target of the Millennium Development Goals will not be reached. The target is to halve the number of people without access to basic sanitation by 2015. What needs to happen in order to achieve this?

I think we're definitely seeing... definitely many areas of the world off track, but I think we're also seeing great advances. If you take South Asia for example, there was

almost a doubling in terms of coverage in between 1990 and 2004, it went from about 17 percent to 37 percent and I think we really need to start looking at where we have success stories and what can be done. In most cases where the successes have happened it's because we've started listening to people and meeting peoples needs rather than coming with a top-down technology development programme.

What are the biggest sanitation-related challenges?

I think we have a lot of knowledge and a lot of capacity in terms of technologies. I think we often lack the technologies on the community mobilisation, the community participation and involving the private sector within the whole process and I think maybe we need to go back and start looking at developing capacities in these regions. The other challenge that needs to be addressed is bringing the private sector on board. Sanitation is a major economic boost in any country and also if we can involve the private sector – and when I talk about private sector I'm not just talking about the large multinationals – I'm talking about the local service providers, the local masons, the local slab builders, they all have a very important role and if we leave everything to the public sector I don't think we'll achieve the MDGs. And I think finally the other challenge is basically ensuring that there is political will and support right across the board for sanitation.

And how does sanitation investments contribute to economic development?

Well, we know from recent studies that it's estimated that for every dollar invested in sanitation we'll get, we will gain 9.1 dollars in economic benefits. And those economic benefits are basically in relation to time saved, work related days, infant days gains, reduced costs to the health system. For example 12 percent of all health expenditure in Sub-Saharan Africa is on diarrhoea and if sanitation can reduce diarrhoea by 88 percent: imagine the impact on the health budgets right across Africa if we could reduce diarrhoea.

Therese Dooley, thanks very much for your time.