

# The great promise of the International Year of Sanitation

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*The General Assembly of the United Nations established 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation (IYS). The IYS objective was to put the global community on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal sanitation target. This paper describes how, as implemented, the IYS was a successful global advocacy and communications campaign which communicated five key messages: that access to basic sanitation improves health, generates economic development, promotes social development, helps the environment, and is universally achievable.*

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2008 IS THE INTERNATIONAL YEAR OF SANITATION (IYS). It is also the International Year of the Potato, International Year of Planet Earth and the International Year of Languages. While cynics have always debated the value of such 'international years', given the dysfunctional world we live in, at least in the case of sanitation, the designation is both legitimate and warranted.

This is because our dysfunctional world consists of two halves: half have good sanitation, and half don't even have basic sanitation. For the half with good sanitation, it is a world with access to the collection, transport, treatment and disposal or reuse of human excreta, domestic waste water and solid waste. It is also a world where associated hygiene behaviours such as washing hands after using the toilet, before and after preparing food, and when handling sick children, are ingrained routines. For the other half without even basic sanitation, it is a world where, quite simply, proper disposal of human excreta would be a luxury of life-saving proportions.

Unfortunately, donors, governments and organizations have virtually orphaned sanitation by placing it as an add-on to water programmes. Given that 884 million people (down from 1.2 billion) lack access to safe drinking water, and 2.5 billion to basic sanitation, the

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numbers have long proved that sanitation should not be an afterthought (UNICEF and WHO, 2008).

For these reasons, the International Year of Sanitation was needed. The year gave sector professionals the chance to get the right sanitation messages out, and to start down the path that will lead to a whole planet, rather than half a planet, that is clean.

### **Aims of the International Year of Sanitation**

The idea for the IYS came from the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB), which is chaired by the well-known water and sanitation advocate His Royal Highness Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands. UNSGAB, created in 2004, proposed the idea to the United Nations General Assembly. The General Assembly acknowledged that progress on sanitation had been slow and uneven and declared 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation (United Nations General Assembly, 2006). Practical responsibility for implementing the year was delegated in turn to the UN-Water Task Force on Sanitation. UN-Water is the inter-agency coordinating mechanism made up of the UN agencies, programmes and funds that have a significant role in tackling global water and sanitation concerns.

From the outset, however, the IYS differed from other similarly high-minded international efforts. It was not intended to be a quantitative, technical or goal-setting effort like the Millennium Development Goals, or, for that matter, the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade of the 1980s. The IYS was to be more qualitative and politically oriented. It was to be about raising awareness of sanitation and raising new resources – of people, ideas and money – for the subject.

Further, the IYS was not intended to be an internal rallying cry. On the contrary, it presented a big chance for development professionals to use 2008 to raise the profile of sanitation among leaders outside our sector to a higher level, so that it doesn't fall back down again. Development professionals had the opportunity to be enthusiastic and energetic, particularly when they communicated externally with political leaders, the target of much of the advocacy around sanitation during 2008.

To support efforts to reach out to political leaders, a series of regional sanitation meetings were held as platforms for political commitments to raise the profile of sanitation to meet the MDGs. The meetings facilitated knowledge exchange in the development of large-scale, sustainable sanitation and hygiene programmes. The regional meetings included AfricaSan, EaSan (East Asia), LatinoSan and SaCoSan (South Asia, November 2008).

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The International Year of Sanitation is about raising awareness of sanitation and raising new resources

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African ministers signed up to spending at least 0.5 per cent of GDP on sanitation and hygiene

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The conferences were a success and attracted thousands of political leaders and development experts at the local, national and regional levels. Political leaders stepped up with positive, specific and progressive declarations of intent. At AfricaSan in February 2008, 32 African ministers signed the eThekweni Declaration, which recognized the importance of spending at least 0.5 per cent of GDP on sanitation and hygiene (AfricaSan, 2008). The Declaration was later submitted to the African Union at its annual meeting. Mere attendance at such conferences indicated the greater level of commitment: AfricaSan in 2003 included only eight ministers. At LatinoSan, the attending ministers agreed to the Cali Declaration. The document captured their commitment to prioritizing sanitation in national development policies, supporting the accomplishment of the main objectives in the IYS, and strengthening inter-governmental cooperation in the region (LatinoSan, 2007). At other meetings, sanitation was a major theme. Nearly 50 different sessions at the World Water Week in Stockholm in August 2007, for example, were sanitation focused.

The case for sanitation was also made in fora where sector professionals have not traditionally been active. The African Union meeting had sanitation (and water) as a key theme and drew the attention of civil society and non-governmental organizations. The theme was also in focus during the G8 meeting in Japan in July 2008; WaterAid was visibly active pushing action on sanitation in Toyako. The World Economic Forum meeting had a strong water focus and provides an opportunity for sanitation advocacy in 2009.

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From the biggest global mass broadcasters, to the tiniest local newspapers, reporting on sanitation has been good in 2008

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But while political leaders were the natural focus, much IYS energy and advocacy was directed at audiences such as the media. From the biggest global mass broadcasters, to the tiniest local newspapers, reporting on sanitation was good in 2008 thanks in part to our stepped up efforts. BBC World aired several sanitation-related specials, and opinion-editorial articles appeared in general publications such as the *New York Times* ('Send in the latrines', 19 May 2008) and more specialized ones such as *The Lancet* (2008).

To build upon the outreach to these different audiences in 2009 and beyond, sector professionals must continue to present consistent, unified messages about sanitation and hygiene. Whatever disagreements we may have over this sanitation technology or that sanitation figure, we cannot present a disunited front. We cannot let the best be the enemy of the good.

So which messages were repeated over and over again in 2008 to raise the sanitation profile up a level? They were: access to basic sanitation: 1) improves health; 2) generates economic development; 3) promotes social development; 4) helps the environment; and 5) is universally achievable (UN-Water, 2008).

## Sanitation is vital for human health

Without a doubt, sanitation improves health. This first IYS argument is typically favoured by sector professionals and proved effective in 2008. One relatively under-publicized finding of the Disease Control Priority Project (DCPP), for example, noted that hygiene promotion to prevent diarrhoea is the most cost-effective health intervention



Hygiene promotion to prevent diarrhoea is the most cost-effective health intervention in the world. Credit: Selvi R. Rajashree/Unicef

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An online reader survey by the BMJ voted sanitation the greatest medical advance of the past 150 years

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in the world (Jamison et al., 2006). The DCP – a joint activity similar in structure to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – found that software interventions, in general, were more effective than higher-cost, headline-grabbing hardware interventions such as anti-retroviral therapy for HIV/AIDS.

To development professionals, it has long been clear that access to sanitation reduces faeco-oral diseases, and such diseases are great killers. Diarrhoea alone takes some 1.5 million lives every year, mostly young ones – 1.4 million of these are preventable (WHO/UNICEF, 2008). Remember also that an online reader survey by the BMJ voted sanitation the greatest medical advance of the past 150 years (Ferriman, 2007). Another target for advocacy efforts in 2008 was the health sector, and it must be even more so in the future. The medical profession could be charged with ‘irreversible neglect’, given the clear health implications of better access to sanitation and the cost-effectiveness of preventive measures.

### Sanitation generates economic benefits

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US\$1 invested in sanitation generates economic benefits valued at an average of \$9

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The argument that appeals most to decision-makers such as heads of state, ministers of finance, prime ministers, etc., was the second IYS argument, that sanitation generates economic benefits. This argument is based mainly on the value of time saved by not being ill. The headline figure, derived mainly on research related to sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, home to nearly 2.35 billion of the 2.5 billion lacking access to basic sanitation, was that US\$1 invested in sanitation generates economic benefits valued at an average of \$9 (Hutton and Haller, 2004; WHO and UNICEF, 2008). This figure garnered headlines throughout the year.

Overall, it would cost approximately \$10 bn per year to halve the proportion of people without basic sanitation by 2015, the MDG sanitation milestone date (UNDP, 2006). If sustained, the same investment could achieve basic sanitation for the entire world within another one or two decades. On a global scale, \$10 bn is a drop in the bucket. It is less than 1 per cent of world military spending in 2006 (SIPRI, 2007).

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Countries with a lower infant mortality rate also have a higher rate of economic growth

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While sanitation clearly offers a great return on investment and is a cost-effective health intervention, it also presents a quandary: the organization or agency that spends the money is not the one that derives the benefit. Thus it was stressed throughout IYS that more progress on sanitation financing is needed and requires broad cooperation through public and private partnerships, community involvement and public awareness. It also requires making the right linkages and identifying the benefits gained to the financier. It needs pointing

out time and again – as has been done so often during 2008 – that countries with a lower infant mortality rate also have a higher rate of economic growth (UNDP, 2006). Healthier people work longer and earn more disposable income; the first and second IYS arguments were inextricably linked.

### **Sanitation contributes to dignity and social development**

This third IYS argument in 2008 was one that people themselves actually use, mainly thinking of privacy, dignity, convenience and safety. Not having a clean, private place to defecate and urinate means using plastic bags, railway lines, fields or roadsides. For women it means endangering their health, and sometimes their life, while they can only dream about what is commonly called dignity.

Perhaps the most important factor for social development is women's education. Indeed, it may be the only development activity which is more important than sanitation itself. Sanitation facilities in schools and women's education are clearly linked, mainly in the case of menstruation, which is certainly under-reported since it is something which people don't feel comfortable talking about.

Privacy, dignity, convenience and safety are motivating factors which get people to change their behaviours: to build, use and maintain toilets, to wash their hands after using the toilet, and so on. When the latrine pit is full, the demand for privacy and dignity is not. Hence a message from 2008 was that we need to implement sanitation by creating demand, and not by subsidizing supply.

### **Sanitation helps the environment**

Access to basic sanitation also improves environmental protection. This fourth IYS argument was pushed during 2008 but is generally a neglected one. It has great ramifications for the future, mainly through preventing pollution of water resources, and in the reuse of excreta for agriculture. This is an argument with a negative externality: one person or village can affect many others when local water resources are polluted by open-defecated excreta washing in to streams and groundwater,

In the future, the reuse of compost for agriculture will become more important. Within the sanitation sector, there is a great call for 'ecological sanitation' which will take better advantage of this reuse potential. As appealing as it may be as a concept (and people in the sector view it both ways), ecological sanitation by itself won't persuade millions of poor people to build toilets now. More toilets, quite simply, must be built, and the incentive for building them must come

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from people themselves. Once that is done, the reuse of compost – and the protection of local water resources – will increase. In that scenario, the world's daily quantity of openly defecated excreta (which, if collected, would fill an 80,000 seat stadium) would be put to great beneficial use, for example, in agriculture and land reclamation.

### Improving sanitation is achievable ...

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We now need to scale up existing good ideas, not just support more pilot projects

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The fifth IYS argument was also the rallying cry for professionals during the entire year. Collectively, we as a sanitation community said: 'We have analysed our work, got the science right, and agreed on the most important points'. These points led to our messages. As we said this year, we now need to scale up existing good ideas in 2009 and beyond, not just support more pilot projects. We need to think about sanitation on a much bigger scale than in the past. The \$10 bn per year figure cited earlier may sound like a lot to development professionals, but it does not to others.

Good ideas are coming forward. The Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council launched its Global Sanitation Fund in March 2008. The purpose of the pooled fund is to help larger numbers of poor people to attain safe and sustainable sanitation services and adopt good hygiene practices. People-centred and nationally owned, it is a demand-driven mechanism to bring new funds into the sector, and it is the first fund of its kind.

Positive trends which were also highlighted in 2008 and which will help in achieving universal sanitation coverage are:

- the recognition of sanitation as distinct from water and hence as an important subject in its own right;
- increased understanding of why people do or don't want sanitation;
- people-centred approaches such as community-led total sanitation, especially in rural areas;
- much more attention to shared sanitation solutions and facilities, especially in urban areas;
- an emphasis on sustained use of services rather than simply on provision of facilities;
- more emphasis on hygiene especially hand washing;
- loan finance mechanisms and social entrepreneurs applying their talents and ideas to sanitation, to complement existing grant finance mechanisms.

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More emphasis is needed on hygiene, especially hand washing

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Other exciting trends were observed, recognized and promoted. The African ministers who committed to the indicative financing fig-

ure of 0.5 per cent of GDP to sanitation know that such an investment is small in comparison to the 2 per cent of GDP lost annually to bad sanitation (World Bank, 2008) Of course, allocation of ministerial responsibility for sanitation, creating national sanitation budgets and setting new sanitation policies (as is happening) also helps to make sanitation achievable.

### ... and here is how

Four important points were made in 2008, in addition to the actual IYS messages, in our attempts to persuade other people about sanitation and stimulate general political momentum for people inside and outside of our sector.

1. We as a sanitation community emphasized that hard work is required. Doing sanitation well is difficult, combining social sciences, political, institutional and technical work. It is slow steady work, house by house, community by community. There is no substitute for hard work.
2. We spoke about the subject using plain language that everybody can understand. This helped to bring sanitation and toilets and shit into regular professional and policy dialogue.
3. We highlighted the need for more strong leadership of the kind shown by the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, and by the various ministerial statements and strong political commitments made.
4. We emphasized that we must create more demand. Successful sanitation is led by hygiene promotion, demand creation and raising sanitation higher in people's own priorities – absolutely not by centralized supply-driven programmes building subsidized toilets that people do not want.

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We must speak about sanitation and toilets using plain language that everybody can understand

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Clean toilets bring social inclusion and dignity

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### Advocating beyond the International Year of Sanitation

Over the past 10 years diarrhoea has killed more children than all the people lost in armed conflicts since the Second World War. That depressing reality can be turned around, and lives can be saved, through clean toilets. Clean toilets generate economic development. Clean toilets bring social inclusion and dignity. Clean toilets protect the environment. And clean toilets for everyone can be achieved. These messages must continue to be heard beyond the International Year of Sanitation.

The advocates for these clean toilets – for sanitation and for health – are all around us. They are you and me and anyone and everyone



we can convince. We may not all be experts at communications, but we can all expertly communicate these simple, eloquent and powerful messages by using the tools which were developed during 2008, such as the UN-Water-created IYS Advocacy Kit. Use it to advocate on behalf of the 2.5 billion people who want to use the toilet. They are depending on us, and we must not fail them.

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