

Water is essential for life. Yet many millions of people around the world face water shortages and a daily struggle to secure safe water for their basic needs. Millions of children continue to die every year from preventable water-borne diseases. Water-related natural disasters such as floods, tropical storms and tsunamis exact a heavy toll in human life and suffering. And all too regularly, drought afflicts some of the world's poorest countries, exacerbating hunger and malnutrition.

In the past decade, significant progress has been made in providing people with access to clean drinking water and basic sanitation. But a major effort is still required in the decade ahead to extend these essential services to those still unserved, the vast majority of whom are poor people.

Meeting the water and sanitation targets set by the international community for 2015 is a crucial step towards the ultimate goal of providing safe drinking water and adequate sanitation to all. Providing access to water and sanitation is also fundamental for achieving the other Millennium Development Goals, such as alleviating poverty, hunger and malnutrition; reducing child mortality; increasing gender equality; providing more opportunity for education; and ensuring environmental sustainability. Women and girls are overwhelmingly the water haulers of the world, a task that consumes valuable time and energy that girls could otherwise devote to schooling.

Beyond meeting basic human needs, water contributes to sustainable development in other important ways. It is a major source of energy in some parts of the world, while in others its potential as an energy source remains largely untapped. Water is also necessary for agriculture and for many industrial processes. And in more than a few countries, it makes up an integral part of transport systems. With improved scientific understanding, the international community has also come to appreciate more fully the valuable services provided by water-related ecosystems, from flood control to storm protection and water purification. Though some analysts have predicted future conflicts over water, many countries successfully share river basins, inland seas and other water resources, showing that this challenge can also be a powerful catalyst for international cooperation.

THE INTERNATIONAL DECADE FOR ACTION, "WATER FOR LIFE", provides an excellent opportunity for the international community to advance towards a truly integrated approach to the management of the world's water that ensures its sustainable use for generations to come. I urge everyone to give the decade their full support.

KOFI ANNAN

United Nations Secretary-General

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