



Water: Quenching a Global Thirst

The human right of access to water is perhaps the most widely denied right in the world. More than one billion people lack access to safe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion people live without the conditions to dispose of human waste and maintain personal hygiene in a way that avoids illness or disease.

The African continent has an estimated population of over 800 million, but some 300 million Africans have no access to safe drinking water and 313 million lack basic sanitation.

The impact of lack of access to drinking water, sanitation and simple hygiene is felt mostly by children, as more than [one million children die needlessly](#) each year from diarrhoea caused by a [lack of clean drinking water](#).

Lack of water is also a significant problem for [small-scale farmers](#), who represent a majority of farmers in developing countries. More than 95% of African farmers have no access to water for [crop irrigation](#), for example, and have to rely on raid-fed production. That severely restricts crop yields in many locations and imposes a [huge work burden](#) (especially on women) to try to keep crops watered and alive.



Certain basic requirements are essential for a dignified life, indeed for life itself. Water is one of these essential human needs.

An adequate supply of safe, clean water is necessary to prevent death from dehydration, reduce the risk of water-related disease and provide for drinking, cooking, personal and domestic hygiene requirements – as well as crops and livestock.

In 2000, the United Nations (UN) set a Millennium Development Goal (MDG) to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. To achieve this means [bringing clean water to 300,000 people every day by 2015](#). The United Nations Development Programme has estimated the cost of meeting this target at €7.5bn every year from 2008 to 2015.

The money required sounds big and the [challenge involved is huge](#). Yet because the poor in developing countries prioritise access to water and sanitation, the efforts of governments and NGOs in this area end up being multiplied massively by the inputs of people themselves. And the €7.5bn required to meet the UN target, although considerable, is still less than the sum spent on bottled mineral water in Western Europe in 2007.

The effects of [climate change](#) will present [significant problems in the future](#), with more severe flood and drought events, but also [less access to river and lake water](#) in many places, creating problems for human and animal health, loss of land and livelihoods. Violent conflict for resources is expected to create ‘[water refugees](#)’. Least developed countries have done little to contribute to climate change but, according to the UN, they are most vulnerable to its effects – with Africa

the most vulnerable region because of the extreme poverty of many Africans, frequent natural disasters such as floods and droughts, and an agriculture heavily dependent on rainfall. By 2050, 'water stress' is projected to affect 600 million people in 18 or more countries in Africa alone.



"A few generations ago, the poorer citizens of leading industrial nations had life expectancies not so different from those we see in Sub-Saharan Africa today. It was only when public services for health, education, water and sanitation were provided for all that life expectancies ... rose sharply."

Mary Robinson - 2006

What are Irish NGOs doing about it?

Few Irish NGOs focus directly on water as a development priority, yet many address [related issues](#) every day – for instance through their work in agriculture, supporting livelihoods, public health, women's empowerment, community participation and humanitarian assistance. Among other actions, Irish NGOs are:

- ★ Securing [emergency supplies](#) of clean water by drilling boreholes and providing water storage tanks and water purification tablets;
- ★ Investing in [infrastructure](#) to assist poor and isolated rural communities;
- ★ Providing oral [dehydration](#) sachets to promote early treatment of dehydration from diarrhoea;
- ★ Organising [hygiene activities](#) to reduce the incidence of diarrhoea, typhoid, dysentery and other water-borne diseases;
- ★ Facilitating [access to water for irrigation](#) to help increase yields in agricultural production;
- ★ Working with communities to design and install [solar water pumps](#);
- ★ Setting up [village water committees](#) to give communities ownership over water infrastructure and an interest in maintaining it;
- ★ Partnering with local NGOs in developing countries to [develop learning and understanding](#) about the right to water; and
- ★ Working with local NGOs, women's groups, farmers' groups and communities who are [advocating for greater investment in water and sanitation](#) by their own governments.

The benefits of improved water and sanitation services include, in addition to quality of life gains, improvement in productive time due to less time spent ill, reduced health sector and personal costs, and the value of prevented deaths. The UN estimates that for every €1 invested in water and sanitation, there is a multiplier effect of €8 more through [reduced health spending and increased worker productivity](#).

Protecting adequate supplies and ensuring equitable access to sufficient safe drinking water will be [a global problem in years to come](#). In many developing countries, it will present a huge challenge to sustainable human development. In some locations, including arid and semi-arid parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, balancing scarce water resources with fair and sustainable access to them will continue to be [a matter of life and death](#).

