

Turning the tide on water-borne diseases

Across much of the developing world, a silent tsunami is raging. For lack of clean water and sanitation, as many poor people die each month as perished in the Southeast Asian tsunami of December 2004.

An estimated 6 million died of water-borne diseases in 2003, according to the World Health Organization. Many were children.

It is an international disaster of staggering proportions. But unlike the tsunami that devastated Southeast Asia, this one can be stopped.

The Aspen Institute and the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions recently convened more than 30 top experts in public health, water conservation and environmental safety. We asked them to identify fast, affordable ways to supply clean water and sanitation to the developing world, especially where the need is greatest in villages and rural regions, and in poor communities at many cities' edges.

Their recommendations are summarized in a 40-page report, "A Silent Tsunami," which we've published in preparation for the 4th World Water Forum in Mexico City next March.

The report features 10 recommendations for priority action, and many examples of innovative projects already under way by governments, businesses, and civic- and faith-based groups.

Tapping new solutions

Especially intriguing are projects that use decentralized water treatment systems to deliver clean water to isolated or high-risk groups, such as children at schools and orphanages. UNICEF estimates that half the world's schools lack this basic service.

Aside from the obvious health benefits, this approach fosters new hope for the future

by promoting better school attendance and academic performance, especially among girls who previously often spent hours each day hauling water from distant sites.

Rainwater collection, household point-of-use filtration products, and self-financing community-run wells and irrigation systems that deliver water for a nominal fee are among other promising approaches.

To extend the benefits of these approaches more widely, they must be expanded and scaled up—an enterprise that will require substantial international support. This should be viewed not as charity, but as an investment in fostering new markets, containing the spread of water-borne diseases and ensuring our own future water supply.

Building large drinking water and wastewater facilities, and laying pipes to extend coverage to each household also may be necessary. But that is a lengthy and expensive proposition, best suited for densely populated areas with stable governments.

Access to clean water is fundamental to human health and dignity, and for promoting sustainable economic growth in impoverished and unstable regions. Yet a billion or more people—three times the U.S. population—still live without safe drinking water; twice that lack basic sanitation.

The humanitarian impulse to bring clean water and sanitation to these people is strong. The economic and environmental arguments are compelling. The array of practical solutions is growing. The time for action is now.



"A Silent Tsunami"

You can download the entire report at www.nicholas.duke.edu/institute/water

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