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Ending 'water apartheid' is urged

A U.N. report describes a crisis in developing nations. Improving child survival rates is a goal.

By Robyn Dixon
Los Angeles Times

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa - While people in Africa's wealthy suburbs use water to spray down driveways, maintain lush lawns, and fill pools, slum dwellers often pay much more per gallon for what little of the crucial resource they can get, according to a U.N. Development Program report calling for an end to "water apartheid."

At the same time, dirty water is the second-leading cause of death among children globally, after respiratory infections. It kills 1.8 million children younger than 5 each year, more than AIDS, malaria, war or car accidents, the report says.

"In the year 2015, they plan to send a spaceship to Jupiter to search for water, yet in Africa or India, we can't get water to people who need it," Kevin Watkins, the report's author, said at a briefing for reporters in Johannesburg.

The report's main contention is that, if countries boost access to clean water and sanitation simultaneously, the rates of child survival in developing countries can rocket "almost overnight," Watkins said.

Globally, 2.6 billion people have no access to proper sanitation and 1.1 billion people lack clean water. Most of the latter group use about 1.3 gallons of water a day, compared with 40 gallons a day used by the typical American, the biggest water guzzler on the planet.

"It is hard to find anything that has a greater impact on human life than water," Watkins said. "For many people, it is the only chance to escape from poverty."

In Peru, children in families with toilets and clean water were 59 percent more likely to survive childhood than those without, according to the report. In Egypt, the figure is 57 percent.

In cities such as Dar es Salaam, capital of Tanzania, people are paying more for water than New Yorkers, Watkins said.

He said even those developing countries that were boosting access to water often were not also increasing the number of toilets or improving drainage systems, risking the spread of disease.

The report said the crisis in water and sanitation in sub-Saharan Africa retarded economic growth by 5 percent of gross domestic product a year, more than the region receives in foreign aid. A big boost in spending on water and sanitation would pay for itself in economic growth.

"No other investment could bring greater benefits," Watkins said. He said collecting water was a colossal waste of labor, with the burden falling overwhelmingly on women and girls. Sub-Saharan African women spend about 40 billion hours a year walking and queuing to collect water, equivalent to a year's labor for the entire workforce in France.

The report calls for a global action plan led by industrial countries to boost the focus on water and sanitation.

Some countries spend much more on their military than water. In Pakistan, where 118,000 people die every year from diarrhea caused by dirty water, the government spends 0.1 percent of its budget on water and sanitation and 47 times more on the military.

India, where 450,000 die annually from diarrhea, spends eight times more on its military than on water resources, and Ethiopia, which has one of the highest rates of infant mortality because of lack of water and sanitation, spends 10 times more on the military.

Watkins said many developing countries failed to accord water and sanitation the central role necessary to save lives and improve standards of living and the economy.