

WE SAY

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The importance of sanitation cannot be overstated because of the impact the lack of it can have on public health. Many of the Pacific Islands too, like most developing countries all over the world, have been lagging behind in their sanitation goals as mandated by the MDGs and if left unchecked, could pose a serious threat to the health of islanders'

One of the growing problems that insular environments like the islands have had to contend with but one that does not get the attention it deserves is that of the disposal of waste of all kinds.

Natural growth in populations, national economies and importantly, the growth in tourism—the cornerstone of the economy of many islands nations—has meant ever increasing volumes of waste being generated in the islands and their immediate littoral environments.

Over the past few years, almost all the Pacific Islands have had to struggle with waste disposal issues, which have been particularly pronounced in the case of more densely populated islands like Fiji and Kiribati.

A few years ago, a major relocation exercise of a huge garbage dump that was threatening to grow into a health hazard for the residents of Suva and the nearby town of Lami was carried out at considerable expense.

In the main urban centre of Kiribati, where land is getting scarcer because of the twin factors of population growth and sea level rise, growing landfills are posing a challenge despite the country having to ship out its garbage from time to time.

And for many years now, effluent seeping into the surrounding lagoon has been a cause for growing concern. This is a familiar scenario in many other atoll nations and in spite of initiatives by environmental organisations and schemes devised by them to curb pollution, the problems persist.

A far more serious problem than the disposal of solid waste that ends up in dumps such as packaging material, food waste and other household refuse is one of domestic sanitation.

Many of the urban agglomerations in the islands lack efficient effluent collection and channelling systems as well as treatment facilities, increasing the risk of water and soil borne diseases.

But this is not a problem that is confined to the islands alone.

According to the Switzerland-based Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), 40 percent of the world's population or as many as 2.6 billion people do not have access to basic sanitation.

The organisation was formed in 1990 following a United Nations General Assembly resolution and the World Health Organisation (WHO) hosts its secretariat. Its mission is to achieve sustainable water supply and sanitation for all people.

Every year, as many as 10 million children die all over the world: poor sanitation and hygiene are the chief or underlying causes in over half of these deaths. Diarrhoeal diseases, caused primarily by inadequate sanitation, are the second largest killer of children and cause 17 percent of deaths in children under-five.

2008: Year of Sanitation

In the world as in the Pacific Islands, the achievement of targets set by the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for halving the number of people who have no access to sanitation facilities by 2014 lags greatly behind other goals such as access to drinking water.

For some reason, both national and local governments seem to have concentrated far more on ensuring access to drinking water—of course, one of the most important requirements for human existence—than sanitation. The importance of sanitation cannot be overstated because of the deep impact the lack of it can have on public health.

Many of the Pacific Islands too, like most developing countries all over the world, have lagged behind in their sanitation goals as mandated by the MDGs and if left unchecked could pose a serious threat to the health of islanders.

To bring this important issue to centre stage globally, 2008 has been declared the Year of Sanitation and the Switzerland-based WSSCC has announced a number of initiatives to help countries

gain momentum in their efforts to provide better sanitation facilities to their populations in line with MDG targets.

If all the world's developing nations are to meet targets prescribed by the MDGs, they would need as much as US\$9.5 billion every year. This would result in savings of US\$63 billion in health bills. Assuming all of humanity on the planet had access to sanitation, that savings would rise to a whopping US\$225 billion, according to WSSCC.

Recognising the fact that the biggest stumbling block in the achievement of this very important goal for developing nations is finance, the WSSCC last month launched a global fund to coincide with the Year of Sanitation.

It is the first global financing mechanism that aims to increase expenditure on sanitation and hygiene.

The fund seeks to support national efforts to help larger numbers of poor people attain sustainable access to basic sanitation and good hygiene practices.

Many developing countries

including in the Pacific Islands have their individual national sanitation and hygiene policies but have no funds—and in many cases—no expertise on how to implement them.

The WSSCC has plans to fund individual national projects and work with governments to achieve their individual MDG goals.


The WSSCC will concentrate mainly on community level projects rather than top-down projects involving the building of large centralised plants and the laying of huge pipelines over vast distances.

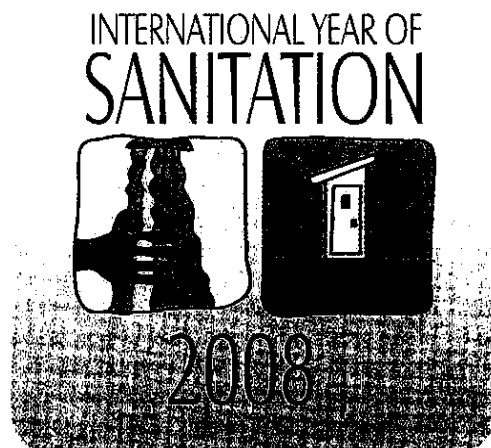
It will also incorporate programmes dealing with hygiene education and raising awareness.

The Pacific Islands environment could benefit greatly from the fund as their needs are mostly at the community levels, there being no major urban centres unlike other developing countries particularly in the Asian region.

The need of the Pacific Islands is also urgent as land is scarce and shrinking because of growing populations and ecological factors such as climate change.

The continued lack of sanitation facilities and the slow pace of growth in achieving the MDGs in this area put the Pacific Islands populations at ever increasing health risks. It is imperative for Pacific Islands leaders to organise themselves, their concerned individual ministries and liaise with the regional offices of the United Nations development agencies in their respective countries to access finances from the newly established fund.

For the achievement of this important MDG in a timely manner will not just improve sanitation facilities in the islands but will also ensure a far cleaner environment, considerable savings on healthcare and bring dignity into the lives of citizens. 



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