

Written by Administrator

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**Suva, August 4, 2010:** Last week, by a vote of 122 countries in favour and none against, the United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution that saw the access to water and sanitation become a fundamental human right. It is, however, a right that many in the Pacific don't enjoy.

The region's access to improved drinking water and sanitation lags behind the rest of the world. About 46% of Pacific populations have access to improved drinking water compared to the global average of 87%. Similarly only 48% of Pacific populations have access to improved sanitation compared to 62% globally.

Oceania collectively has been off-track in meeting the UN's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets for water and sanitation. In fact between 1998 and 2008 the percentage of the region's population with access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities declined by 1% and 2% respectively.

In the Pacific more than 20% of all deaths in children up to 14 years of age is attributable to unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and insufficient hygiene. This number is even higher for children under five years of age. Continued concerns about outbreaks of typhoid in Fiji and cholera in Papua New Guinea further highlight the need to improve water, sanitation and hygiene in the region.

Marc Overmars, Head of the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission's (SOPAC) Water and Sanitation Programme said that it is a situation that needs urgent attention.

"Despite the commitments expressed by Pacific island countries, the level of priority provided to address these issues has been inadequate," Mr Overmars said. "More resources need to be focused on water issues, to improve service delivery and to improve water resources management."

In 2006 Pacific Leaders agreed that water, sanitation and hygiene challenges facing the region should be addressed through the implementation of the Pacific Regional Action Plan on Sustainable Water Management (RAP). In December 2007, Pacific Leaders attending the Asia Pacific Water Summit in Japan reiterated their commitment to the provision of adequate

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sanitation and safe drinking-water for their people. Yet, water and sanitation were not identified as a priority under the 2009 Forum Leaders' decisions.

"The Forum did identify priorities, such as economic development, agriculture, health, land management and climate," Mr Overmars said. "These priorities are all critically dependent on the sustainable management of water resources and effective management of wastewater."

"Climate change is expected to further impact water resources and sanitation, exacerbating related issues like health," Mr Overmars concluded. "Water and sanitation should therefore be a core focus when directing climate change funds, not just an afterthought."

SOPAC is the regional agency mandated to coordinate water and sanitation throughout the Pacific via its Water and Sanitation Programme. It provides support to member countries through three components: Water Resources Management, Water and Sanitation Services and Water Governance.

In pursuing the resolution to include water and sanitation as a human right the UN General Assembly expressed deep concern that globally some 884 million people were without access to safe drinking water and more than 2.6 billion lacked access to basic sanitation. It expressed alarm that 1.5 million children under five years old died each year as a result of water and sanitation-related diseases.

Globally the lack of access to water kills more children annually than AIDS, malaria and measles combined, while the lack of sanitation affects 2.6 billion people, or 40 per cent of the global population,

Bolivia's representative said the upcoming summit to review progress on the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) must provide a clear signal that water and sanitation were human rights. He emphasized the right to drinking water and sanitation was essential for the full enjoyment of life.

The MDG on water and sanitation is to reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

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