



World Water Day 2007 - Questions and Answers

What is the difference between water scarcity and drought?

While arid and drought-stricken areas suffer the most, people everywhere can be affected by water scarcity, even those who live in areas with plenty of rainfall or freshwater. Water scarcity occurs whenever the ways in which we use and distribute water cannot fully meet the demand from households, farms, industry and the environment.

What causes water scarcity?

Anything that causes water shortages, contaminates freshwater supplies, damages the facilities that carry water to people, or keeps significant numbers of people from receiving clean water can lead to water scarcity. Major factors include drought, the heavy use of water for agriculture, a lack of water near people's homes, high water tariffs, and the overuse of lakes, waterways and aquifers. Other causes range from flooding to poorly-placed dams.

How serious is the problem?



By 2025, more than 2.8 billion people worldwide will be living in water-stressed countries or regions, defined as when available water resources per inhabitant fall below the level of 1 700 cubic metres per year, which is considered to be the national threshold for meeting water requirements for agriculture, industry, domestic purposes, energy and the environment. However, in much of the world, the issue is not so much a lack of water, as gaining access to that water. In many cases, it is a question of funding shortages, poor management and governance, unfair distribution and pricing of water, and the lack of political will to change the way in which we use and share water.

Can we cut back on the water used for agriculture?

People need food to thrive and improve their lives, so agricultural production must increase if we are to reduce hunger and meet the needs of the growing world population. At the same time, irrigation for agriculture accounts for 70 percent of the freshwater withdrawn. This means that we should focus on finding ways to produce food for more people while using proportionally less water.

What does global warming have to do with water scarcity?

Experts are divided on the extent to which human activity, deforestation and pollution affect the climate, but many point to the rising level of the earth's seas, the rapid melting of glaciers, the frequency and ferocity of recent hurricanes, floods and drought as consequences of climate change or global warming. All of these can threaten the amount or safety of a community's water supply.

How can a shortage of water lead to or worsen poverty?

Without enough water to produce food and without access to sufficient water for drinking and proper sanitation, people are unable to eat, earn sufficient income or resist disease. Entire generations of children, especially girls, skip classroom education to spend time walking long distances to retrieve freshwater.

Should more people move to urban areas to get better access to water?

As the 2nd UN World Water Development Report published in 2006 recounts, living in urban areas is no guarantee of access to water. The urban poor typically live near water facilities but have no direct supplies or cannot afford to pay high water tariffs. Also, the rapid growth of urban areas around the world has threatened water supplies with sewage runoff and industrial pollution.

continued overleaf



World Water Day 2007 - Questions and Answers (continued)

Why do poor people pay more for water than the rich?

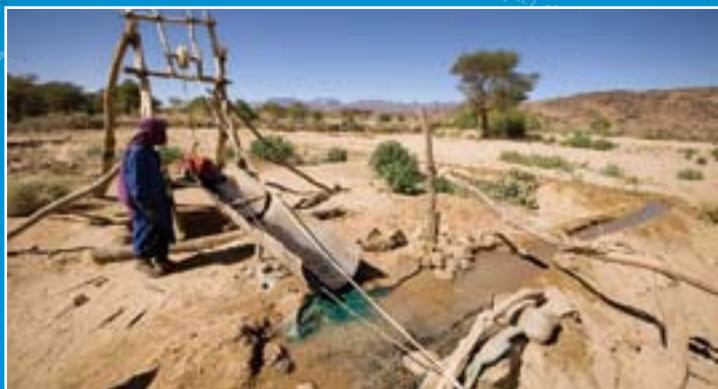


People in the slums of developing countries who must buy containers of water from vendors typically pay five to ten times more per unit of water than those who have access to piped water. The reasons tend to fall into three categories: a lack of facilities to conserve and deliver water to poorer communities, inadequate management of water services, and a lack of political power to demand fair water pricing.

Why aren't there more facilities to desalinate sea water or to draw freshwater from the ground?

Some countries convert sea water into freshwater, but desalinization is expensive, uses huge amounts of energy and releases significant quantities of brine, which can damage marine environments and kill fish. Groundwater, withdrawn from natural wells below the surface of the earth, is finite and vulnerable to overuse and pollution.

How can small, local water projects make a difference?



Experience has shown that actively involving people who stand to benefit immediately from changes in the way we manage our water resources can lead to better results. Most of the world's available freshwater is used by agriculture and most farmers work small plots of land, often in remote areas. Pilot projects and programmes which support local water conservation techniques can be part of a larger plan at the regional or national level. In urban areas, getting citizens involved can increase efficiency and cut down on corruption.

Why should people get involved?

Water scarcity already affects every continent and more than 40 percent of the people on our planet. The situation is being made more acute by population growth, urbanization and the increases in domestic and industrial water use by people who live in more developed areas. Since water is intricately linked to every aspect of our lives, 24 UN agencies with a broad range of expertise are working together through UN-Water to cope with water scarcity. They are collaborating with governments and civil society to improve the use of the world's water and to protect the environment.

What can I do?

Actively support governments, non-governmental organizations, private foundations and companies which make it a priority to conserve, recycle and protect water resources, and deliver affordable water to people at every level of the community. Do your part to use water more efficiently, reduce pollution and protect the environment. Support funding initiatives that help to make these objectives possible. Everyone needs water and everyone needs to take responsibility.

2007
world water day
22nd March 2007

www.worldwaterday07.org

UN WATER

www.unwater.org