

Water Sanitation: World Toilet Day, 19 November 2018

Summary

The United Nations' World Toilet Day takes place on 19 November each year. The event aims to “help break taboos” around toilets and make sanitation for all a “global development priority”.¹ This is in line with the United Nations' 2030 Development Agenda, which includes a goal focussed on ensuring global access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services. This is to prevent the transmission of several diseases, including cholera, which is linked to dirty water and untreated sewage.

Action Taken by the United Nations

World Toilet Day

On 24 July 2013, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution designating 19 November as World Toilet Day.² The resolution called on United Nations' (UN) member states and relevant stakeholders to “encourage behavioural change” and to implement policies to “increase access to sanitation among the poor”.³ It encouraged member states to approach sanitation in a “much broader context” to include hygiene promotion, the provision of basic sanitation services, sewerage and wastewater treatment, and reuse in integrated water management.

In 2018, World Toilet Day is taking place under the theme “toilets and nature”, which calls on the global population to build toilets and sanitation systems that “work in harmony with our environment”.⁴ The UN has sought to find “nature-based solutions to the sanitation and water crisis”, which it contends will “harness the power of ecosystems”.⁵ Solutions include:

- Composting latrines that capture and treat human waste on site, producing a free supply of fertiliser to help grow crops.
- Human-made wetlands and reed-beds to filter waste water before it is released back into water courses.⁶

Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015, to help combat global issues, including a lack of access to sanitation services, the UN General Assembly adopted the 2030 Development Agenda, titled *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*. The agenda includes a collection of 17 global goals—known as sustainable development goals—and 169 associated targets. Sustainable development goal six calls on UN member states to “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”.⁷ As part of the sustainable goal, there is one associated target that member states should reach by 2020 and seven targets that should be reached by 2030. The targets are :

- By 2020, protect and restore water-related ecosystems, including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes.

- By 2030, achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all.
- By 2030, achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations.
- By 2030, improve water quality by reducing pollution, eliminating dumping and minimising release of hazardous chemicals and materials, halving the proportion of untreated wastewater and substantially increasing recycling and safe reuse globally.
- By 2030, substantially increase water-use efficiency across all sectors and ensure sustainable withdrawals and supply of freshwater to address water scarcity and substantially reduce the number of people suffering from water scarcity.
- By 2030, implement integrated water resources management at all levels, including through cooperation between member states that share the same water sources, as appropriate. Integrated water resources management refers to a process which “promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land and related resources”.⁸
- By 2030, expand international cooperation and support—in the form of sanitation-related official development assistance—to developing countries in water and sanitation-related activities and programmes, including water harvesting, desalination, water efficiency, wastewater treatment, recycling and reuse technologies.
- Continue supporting and strengthening the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management.⁹

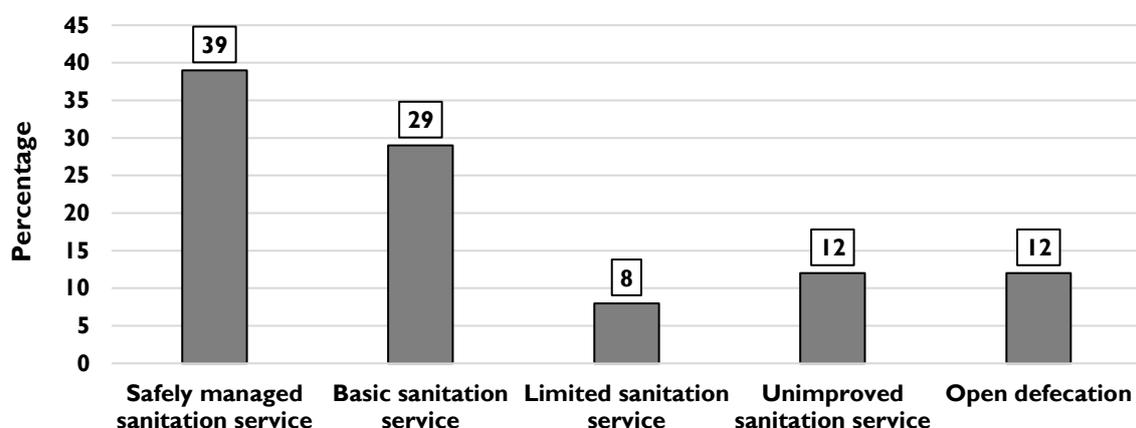
According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the transmission of several diseases, including cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid and polio, is “linked to dirty water and inadequately treated sewage”.¹⁰ WHO notes that waterborne diseases contribute “significant[ally]” to the disease burden worldwide, with waterborne diarrhoeal diseases responsible for two million deaths each year.¹¹ Of the two million deaths, WHO reports that the majority occur in children under 5 years old.¹²

To tackle such issues, the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF) has grouped WASH together, due to each subject being “dependent on the presence of the other”.¹³ For example, without sanitation services, such as toilets, water sources become contaminated; and without clean water, basic hygiene practices are “not possible”.¹⁴

Global Access to Sanitation, Drinking Water and Hygiene Services

UNICEF argues that universal access to adequate sanitation is a “fundamental need and human right”, and, therefore, “securing access for all” would go a “long way” in reducing illness and death.¹⁵ However, UNICEF reports that in 2015, approximately 2.3 billion people worldwide lacked a “basic sanitation service”, which is a sanitation facility that is not shared with households. Among them, almost 892 million people still practised open defecation, whereby people do not have access to a sanitation service.¹⁶ In addition, 856 million people used an “unimproved sanitation service”, which involves use of pit latrines without a slab or platform, hanging latrines or bucket latrines. In contrast, the charity also notes that in the same year, 2.9 billion people used a “safely managed” sanitation service. This is described as a service whereby excretion is disposed of off-site. In addition, 600 million people used a “limited” sanitation service, which involves sharing facilities with other households. Figure I outlines these figures:

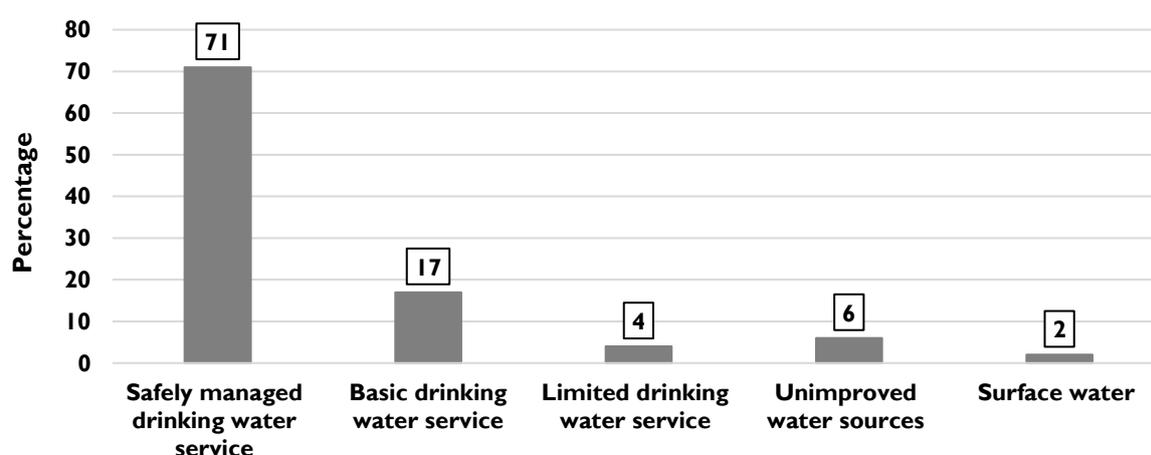
Figure 1: Global Access to Sanitation Services (Percentage), 2015



(Source: UNICEF, [‘Sanitation’](#), July 2017)

Similar to sanitation services, UNICEF also contends that access to safe drinking water is a “fundamental need and human right”.¹⁷ The charity reports that in 2015, approximately 6.5 billion people worldwide used improved sources of drinking water that required no more than 30 minutes per trip to collect water, which is classified as having “at least basic” drinking water services.¹⁸ In contrast, UNICEF found that there were approximately 844 million people who lacked a “basic” drinking water service, who either used: limited services, which required more than 30 minutes per trip to collect water; unimproved water sources, such as unprotected wells and springs; or surface water sources, for example, rivers and lakes. The charity notes that populations that have no drinking water service at all and collect water directly from source face “serious risks” to their health and wellbeing.¹⁹ Coverage of global access to drinking water services is outlined in figure 2 below:

Figure 2: Global Access to Drinking Water Services (Percentage), 2015:



(Source: UNICEF, [‘Drinking Water’](#), July 2017)

UNICEF also reports that by 2015, approximately 181 countries had achieved over 75 percent coverage of its population with at least basic drinking water services.²⁰ Further, the charity notes that there are now 11 countries worldwide where less than half of the population uses a basic drinking water service,

compared with 25 countries in 2000. Despite this, UNICEF contends that “huge disparities” in accessing these services remain between countries, with the lowest levels of coverage found in the 48 countries “designated as the least developed countries” by the UN. The UN defines “least developed countries” as those which are “low-income countries confronting severe structural impediments to sustainable development”.²¹ This includes countries that are “highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks” and have “low levels of human assets”.

Reporting its findings on handwashing and hygiene, UNICEF notes that in 2015, just 70 countries—representing 30% of the global population—had comparable data on the availability of basic handwashing facilities, which is used to describe sites with soap and water available on premises. From the available data, UNICEF reports that in the “least developed countries”, approximately 27% of the population had basic handwashing facilities which contained soap and water, whilst 26% of the population had handwashing facilities lacking either soap or water. In contrast, the remaining 47% of the population had no wash facility.²²

UK Government Policy

Global Sanitation Outcomes

In addition to working towards meeting the targets of sustainable development goal six, consecutive governments have worked towards improving sanitation globally, in line with the UK Aid Strategy, published in November 2015.²³ The strategy has four strategic objectives, which the Department for International Development (DFID) uses to determine its priorities for allocating aid. They are as follows:

- Strengthening global peace, security and governance.
- Strengthening resilience and response to crises.
- Promoting global prosperity.
- Tackling extreme poverty and helping the world’s most vulnerable.²⁴

The UK Aid Strategy also seeks to improve WASH outcomes across the world, with the Government vowing to help at least 60 million people gain access to water and sanitation by 2020.²⁵ According to DFID, to support this goal, £183 million of water and WASH-related “bilateral and multilateral financial assistance” was provided in 2015.²⁶ WHO reports that between 2011 and 2015, the UK supported approximately 64.5 million people in gaining access to water and sanitation.²⁷

In May 2018, DFID reaffirmed its commitment to support the world’s poorest people in accessing “sustainable basic services”, such as washrooms and toilets.²⁸ The report notes that between April 2015 to March 2017, the number of people with sustainable access to clean water and/or sanitation through the Department’s support was 27.2 million. This was delivered through several contributing programmes, including the WASH results programme, which is implemented by non-governmental organisations, and by a central programme run by UNICEF. In July 2016, the Government noted that UNICEF “remains the largest delivery partner” for DFID water and sanitation programmes.²⁹

On 24 January 2018, a debate took place in the House of Lords on the availability and sustainable management of water in developing countries. In the debate, the Minister of State at the Department for International Development, Lord Bates, outlined other actions that the Government was taking to improve WASH outcomes. In relation to water security and sanitation, Lord Bates stated that the Government was investing £51 million over six years (January 2013 to March 2019) to support “improved management of water resources”, and would be working with business to “invest more” to

make water available for agriculture, industry and energy.³⁰ The Minister also announced that his Department had recently started a new £27 million programme to support the development of “more resilient water and sanitation” services in Africa and Asia, by “better catchment management” and upgrading existing infrastructure.³¹ Lastly, Lord Bates stated that DFID continued to support the [Sanitation and Water for All Initiative](#), which is a partnership of governments and their development partners and aims to improve the targeting of financial aid and human resources for WASH services.³²

Sanitation in the UK

Data supplied to the BBC from 376 of the 430 councils in the UK has revealed that since 2010, at least 673 public toilets across the United Kingdom are no longer being maintained by major councils (unitary, borough and district).³³ The BBC reports that in 2018 there were 4,486 public toilets run by councils in the UK—a decrease from 5,159 public toilets in 2010. The BBC also found that in 37 areas, major councils no longer ran any public conveniences. It notes that the findings “do not mean there are no toilets available at all”, and that “in many cases”, responsibility for managing public toilets was passed to smaller parish or town councils. According to the company, Disabled Go, which seeks to “empower disabled people by providing independence and choice”, local councils—including town and parish councils—receive their funding from a share of council tax, which is paid to them in the “form of a precept”.³⁴ In accordance with the Public Health Act 1936, local authorities have a power to provide public toilets, despite this, the Act “imposes no duty to do so”.³⁵ In addition to passing the responsibility of public toilets to smaller councils, other public toilets have been passed from the council to community groups to manage.

Commenting in August 2018 on the closure of public toilets, a spokesperson for the Local Government Association stated that councils were “doing everything they can to keep public toilets open” and “ensure there is provision for people with particular needs”.³⁶ However, the spokesperson noted that “substantial reductions” to budgets had left councils having to make “tough choices” regarding public facilities.

The Government has sought to act on the issue of increasing the provision of public toilets in the UK. In his autumn budget speech on 29 October 2018, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond, announced a new mandatory business rates relief for public lavatories.³⁷ According to the National Association of Local Councils, the measure would “save local councils over £2 million”, which, in turn, could be re-invested to keep toilets open and provide other local council services.³⁸ The British Toilet Association, a not-for-profit campaign group for better public toilets, stated that the business rates relief meant that providers and suppliers of public toilets could also “put some added revenue into cleaning and maintenance activities”.³⁹

Further Information

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- Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology, [Access to Water and Sanitation](#), 20 April 2016

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- ⁷ United Nations Development Programme, '[Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation](#)', accessed 29 October 2018.
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- ¹⁵ *ibid.*
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- ¹⁷ United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, '[Drinking Water](#)', July 2017.
- ¹⁸ World Health Organisation and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, '[Progress on Drinking Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: 2017](#)', November 2017, p 10.
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- ²⁴ *ibid.*, p 9.
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- ²⁷ *ibid.*
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- ²⁹ Department for International Development, '[Results Achieved by Sector: Water and Sanitation](#)', July 2016, p 2.
- ³⁰ [HL Hansard, 24 January 2018, col 1079.](#)
- ³¹ *ibid.*, col 1080.
- ³² *ibid.*, col 1082.
- ³³ BBC News, '[Reality Check: Public Toilets Mapped](#)', 15 August 2018.
- ³⁴ DisabledGo, '[Public Toilets Mapped: Where Have They All Gone?](#)', 15 August 2018.
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- ³⁶ Rebecca Smithers, '[Use Our Loos Campaign Urges UK Firms to Open Toilets to Non-customers](#)', *Guardian*, 8 August 2018.
- ³⁷ [HC Hansard, 29 October 2018, col 663.](#)
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