

Long way to go

The latest Human Development Report has little good news for India. India has been ranked 126 among 159 countries, up merely one notch from its ranking last year. India has been ranked third among South Asian countries, behind Sri Lanka and the Maldives. Its economy might be growing at a rate of 8 per cent per year but its performance on life expectancy and educational attainment remains unsatisfactory. Pakistan might have a lower ranking but it has climbed nine notches and China, which is way ahead of India at 81, has moved ahead by four notches over the past year. This year's HDR focuses on the dearth of sanitation and clean water and its impact on the world's poor. It points out that some 1.1 billion people in developing countries have inadequate access to water and 2.6 billion people lack basic sanitation.



Sustained efforts needed to improve quality of life.

Poor sanitation has a devastating impact on health and mortality. Around 1.8 million children die from diarrhoea and almost 50 per cent of all people in developing countries are suffering at any given time from a health problem caused by a lack of water and sanitation. It affects productivity - 443 million school days are lost to water-related illnesses among children.

India has made some progress with regard to access to drinking water; around 88 per cent have access to water. But it is lagging behind on the sanitation front as only 31 per cent have access to safe sanitation. In some instances, sewage mingles with drinking water. Over 20 per cent of communicable diseases in India are water-borne and some 450,000 people - the overwhelming majority are children below the age of three - die every year from diseases that are preventable.

The report points out that it would cost \$10 billion a year to halve the number of people without access to safe drinking water and to provide them with better sanitation. This amount, incidentally, is less than five days' worth of global military spending and less than half of what rich countries spend each year on mineral water. What is needed is official will to accord sanitation the priority it deserves. The message of the report is that India has a long way to go make its economic growth meaningful to people, and has to pay greater attention to improving the quality of their lives.