



## The sanity of sanitation

It is rarely that India wins kudos for its performance in the social sector. The Human Development Report 2006 of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), entitled 'Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty and the Global Water Crisis', gives India a pat on the back for being on track to meet the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving the number of people without access to clean water by 2015. However, as the report points out, India is behind its target for halving the number of people without access to sanitation by that date. Lack of clean water and sanitation facilities (wat/san) are not only a result of poverty, but they also perpetuate and exacerbate poverty. For instance, water-related diseases lead to a loss of productive workdays and heightened private and/or public expenditure on health services. The extent of the problem can be gauged from the fact that at any given time, nearly one in three Indians suffers from a water-related health problem.

To break this vicious cycle of poverty and wat/san deficit, governments need to invest in better wat/san facilities. India, with its growing economy and population, must take urgent steps to ensure water security in the medium and long terms. To make the most of its favourable demographics, it must also ensure adequate human resource development and an enhanced standard of living, for which provision of clean water and sanitation are prerequisites.

The UNDP's calculations show that \$ 1 spent on water and sanitation can yield returns to the tune of \$ 8 in terms of increased productivity and reduced health costs. The report recommends an annual expenditure of 1 per cent of the GDP, and also calls for enhanced international aid. Further, it urges governments to make water a human right, and to systematically integrate wat/san into overall development policies. This, however, requires a paradigm shift at the policy level. For instance, India's prevailing subsidies structure and general infrastructure deficit, which entail the poor spending much more on water than the rich, will have to be changed. Overdrawing of groundwater as a consequence of free or subsidised power needs to be checked. How these issues are tackled will show just how committed the government is about equitable and sustainable development.

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