

WATER AND POVERTY

WATER for ALL WATER BRIEFS



The Basic Picture

Water and poverty are inextricably linked. Poor access to water and insufficient sanitation affect the health of the poor, their food security, and their prospects for making a living. In Asia and the Pacific region -- home to nearly 900 million of the world's poorest people -- one in three people does not have safe drinking water and one in two lacks adequate sanitation.

A Vital Resource

Water is a critical resource for the poor and plays a key role in many aspects of their livelihoods. Poor people depend on or are affected by water resources in four key ways:

- As **direct inputs into production**, such as agriculture; fishing; tree and garden cultivation around homesteads; livestock; and small-scale manufacturing, such as pottery and brick making.
- For **health, welfare, and food security**, especially for vulnerable groups, such as children, the elderly, and women in general. Safe and adequate quantities of water and food security are recognized as preconditions for an acceptable development standard.
- For **ecosystems viability** through which the poor can gain access to the natural resources on which many livelihood aspects, such as forests, fishing, grazing, and crop cultivation, are based.
- The poor are also the most vulnerable to **water-related hazards**, such as extreme floods, droughts, major storms, landslides, and pollution. This vulnerability can undermine any effort to break the poverty trap.

Water Security for the Poor

Effective national water policies and reforms at all levels are required to attain water security for the poor.

- **Pro-Poor Water Governance.** It is essential that all stakeholders, from the grassroots up and, the poor in particular, have their voices heard in the water debate. This will involve increased participation from civil society; the strengthening of local and national institutions; reforming the structure of the economy (including the private sector); and increasing the knowledge and understanding of stakeholders in areas, such as water management, infrastructure maintenance, and administration.

- **Improved Access to Quality Water Services.** Providing increased access to water includes increasing the rights and entitlements of poor communities to use the resources; increasing the infrastructure and technology available to the poor; building up institutions accessible to the poor that can efficiently manage water resources; and bringing in other parties, such as the private sector, to improve service delivery.
- **Water Investment and Pro-Poor Economic Growth.** Water management is an essential input to many aspects of people's livelihood from productive activities, such as agriculture and manufacturing to household maintenance tasks. Focused efforts to meet the needs of the poor must understand the different roles that water security plays in their livelihoods as well as the water-linked economic ventures that provide investment or employment opportunities for the poor.
- **Empowerment and Capacity Development.** It is essential that the poor have a real voice in all aspects of water planning and management process, and acquire the appropriate skills and knowledge. To this end, developing effective, knowledgeable, and representative organizations at the community level is essential. Training and financing must also be provided, where appropriate.
- **Disaster Prevention and Mitigation.** Disaster prevention and mitigation needs to be established as a mainstream component of water management systems. Improved forecasting systems, disaster relief capabilities, and post disaster recovery systems should be an integral part of any pro-poor water management strategy.
- **Sustainable Management of Ecosystems and Water Resources.** The management of water resources must take place within the wider ecosystems context, and all actions should be based on an understanding of the flows of water resources within river basins and how they affect the poor.

Changing Relationships

Reducing poverty is as much about changing relationships within society as it is about meeting basic needs and improving the material conditions of life. It is only through effective partnerships and a pro-poor focus to guide all water operations and decisions that Water For All can be achieved.