

UN Human Rights Council – 21st Session

Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation

Stigma and the realization of the human rights to water and sanitation (Item 3)

WRITTEN STATEMENT

Confronting poverty and stigmatization: addressing water and sanitation issues

Introduction

Franciscans International (FI) welcomes the annual report of the Special Rapporteur (SR) on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, focusing on stigmatisation and discrimination, and stressing the inherent dignity of all human beings.

Despite the fact that the human right to clean drinking water and sanitation has been clearly recognised by the 2010 UNGA Resolution¹ widely supported by UN member states, little progress have been made towards the full implementation of this right, in particular by Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and South Africa. The implementation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), as well, falls short in these countries, in particular MDG 7C which aims to reduce by half the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015.

With reference to the Report, FI would like to draw the attention of the SR to the situation of the aforementioned group of African states where local communities suffer because they are deprived of the access to safe drinking water and sanitation. As a consequence, they are also denied their right to an adequate standard of living and are often excluded from society.

The SR has highlighted that, “people living in poverty face stigmatization and are frequently forced to exist at the margins of society.”² This prevents them to access basic services.

Background and Current Situation

FI visited one of the biggest slum areas in Nairobi³, Kenya, called Mukuru. This area houses over 600,000 people living tightly packed in shanties of about 3 square meters. These shanties are made of mud and iron sheets and 6 to 8 people live in each room on average.

¹ UNGA Res. A/RES/64/292.

² Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, A/HRC/21/42, para 35.

³ This visit was made during a workshop on water and sanitation organized by FI in Nairobi, Kenya, May 2012 entitled “Empower vulnerable and marginalized groups in addressing water and sanitation issues”. 28 participants came from 8 Eastern African countries.

Garbage and open sewages are everywhere and people dump waste in open trenches and drains. A nearby factory releases hazardous wastes, including polluted water, in the rustic canals surrounding the area. These canals flow into the Ngong River which passes right in the middle of the slum.

Children play in and around the huge mounds of garbage and the polluted river and they easily contract pulmonary and skin diseases. There are cases of babies dying due to diseases as a consequence of the lack of hygiene, coupled with the shortage of proper health care and nutritious food.

Proper toilet facilities are not in place. This is the major cause of what people call “flying toilets”; plastic bags used for defecation and then thrown into ditches, on the roadside, or simply as far away as possible.

A local association, Umande Trust, is building toilets which also function as biogas digesters that can be used as fuel community cookers. Some other organisations are working in the education and health fields.

The living conditions in this urban area are appalling. Mukuru is just one out of the countless places throughout the world where people live in extremely precarious living conditions.

Our organisation also collected direct testimonies of other African people who are deprived of their right to safe water and sanitation:

- “Ladies only rely on roof catchment water for their need. If the water finishes they go out to the pond to fetch water which is not safe for human consumption. This becomes a heavy exercise for women since they have to fetch enough water for all uses”. (Kenya);
- “Women rarely share their concerns and priorities about water and sanitation and they participate to a very small extent in community consultations.” (Uganda);
- “The biggest challenge is that there is a counted number of water boreholes and ponds. They are not enough to feed the community; both human beings and animals target the same source of water for basic use. Thus water is unsafe for human consumption since cows pass urine and other wastes in it. Human beings with unclean and unbandaged wounds walk in this water in search for clean water...60% of the people walk for a long distance in search for water for domestic use. (Kenya);
- The total population of Zambia is 13.8 million of which roughly 50 per cent are under the age of 14. Low life expectancy and high levels of poverty persist. Deforestation is growing on a rapid rate as the most people depend on trees for survival-businesses of selling charcoal and fire wood. In the recent months, people have experienced a lot of water pollution. On the 7th January 2012, 756 people in Mufulira, Kantanshi township drunk tap water alleged to have been contaminated with sulphuric acid from Mopani Copper mine and suffered abdominal pains and vomiting. (Zambia);
- “People are not getting sufficient clean water. Among the factors especially in my working area there is a problem of dry weather. It is a very hot area and the society and the herds suffer from water scarcity. There were wells and some springs which have been done by the Catholic Church and by the government but most of them are not functioning because they are out of order and demanding high amount of cost to maintain them. The women have to travel kilometres and kilometres to find water. This has a great difficulty on the life of women and

children. They also die of water related diseases since it is not easy to get clean water.” (Ethiopia);

- My work mostly deals with carrying out fact finding researches on various issues. Water and sanitation was one of the major parameters considered in the research. Poor sanitation and hygiene is the greatest challenge related to slum. High burden of diarrhoeal and other preventable diseases are the result of poor sanitation and hygiene. The mortality rates are high as a result of the water related diseases. Ignorance of the citizens especially the slum dwellers that environment is an issue of concern; I think that is why most slum dwellers indiscriminately damp drainage channels and also construction of pit latrines in the catchment area of a protected spring”. (Uganda);
- I participated fully in raising awareness to people in rural areas: Daudi village, Mbulu District at Manyara Region. The biggest challenge is the poor town planning and settlement that affects the water system, both clean and waste material. Climate change is affecting growth of forest and availability of water and is increasing the problem of scrambling for water and deforestation. The society is not aware of the use of the environment for sustainable development, there is no care for future generations. The society lacks knowledge and material on water preservation (rainwater). (Tanzania);
- The local community is affected by shortage of water supplies for long periods of time. People end up drinking river water which is not treated or polluted. The community is affected greatly by pollution from the industrial sites. Lake Chivero has high level of nutrients in the water because of raw effluent, domestic and industrial waste discharged into it. Yet, it supplies drinking water to Harare.” (Zimbabwe);
- In many African societies, the division of labour is generally centred on gender differences. Women care for the family, ensure the availability of sufficient food and water. In Africa, water is not a man’s business. In both rural and urban areas, from informal settlement slums to the villages up country, women have dominated the use of water domestically throughout their cultural ancestry. Yet, water sources are a tremendous challenge for women in the global South. (Kenya)

Conclusions

Despite the fact that some governments have made significant progress regarding the MDGs, too many people still suffer from discrimination and stigmatization, and “the lack of access to essential services is a symptom, while the root causes lie in stigmatization.”⁴

The situations mentioned above highlight several problems related to water and sanitation, especially the situation of the women, the stigmatization of the poor, sanitation issues, and the pollution of water.

In many countries water is, culturally, a woman’s business. In both rural and urban areas, the women spend up to a quarter of their time collecting and carrying water, often of poor quality. They walk long distances in search of water for domestic use, too often in vain due to its scarcity.

Rarely are they part of decision-making processes regarding integrated resource water management. Women are culturally in charge of providing water, but rarely share their concerns or participate in community consultations regarding water issues. As mentioned in the report, “power relationships

⁴ Id. Para 22.

result in the marginalization and exclusion of certain groups and individuals from decision-making processes, access to resources and services, and the ability to shape social life.”⁵

The dignity of all human beings and particularly of those who are poor, is important, given the widespread human tendency to denigrate and stigmatize the poor. People living in poverty, due to economic, social and cultural factors are facing humiliation, shame, and denial of their rights.

Improper town planning and the proliferation of slum settlements can lead to inner feelings of stigmatization and discrimination. Stigmatization is often embodied in the policies and legislation implemented by institutions mirroring societal attitudes.

Local communities face poor sanitation and hygiene conditions. People in some areas still have no choice other than throwing away human excreta contained in plastic bags into ditches or along the roads. In the same areas it is common to see children playing in the garbage and the human excreta. Poor sanitation and hygiene are the greatest challenges for the slums. Most slum dwellers indiscriminately dump waste in drainage channels and also build pit latrines in the catchment area of protected springs due to lack of awareness of the serious consequences of this.

Two major threats to accessing sufficient safe water are pollution and exposure of water sources to domestic animals. These threaten lives, especially children. Poor health and frequent illness lead to lower productivity and lower income. Child malnutrition is rampant, worsened by water-related illness. The mortality rate is high as a result of water-related diseases. Some slum areas near rivers are polluted by industrial factories. Or in other cases, the physical location of the slums illustrates the hierarchical frame of the society, namely the powerful and the wealthy live on higher ground with the poor below. Thus, the slums are polluted by the garbage from higher-lying areas through the drainage systems. Slums are the garbage dumps of the society.

Franciscans International would like to emphasize that social justice is the fundamental prerequisite of a human rights-based approach. All people have the right to water. Water is not and should not be a commodity; it is a common good that should be preserved from contamination, pollution, commercialization and human greed; water is essential to sustain Mother Earth and its inhabitants.

We recommend the Governments of Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malawi, and South Africa to:

- a) Implement the existing National Action Plans on Water and Sanitation, with particular attention to mainstreaming gender equality in all programs and actions related to water and sanitation, so as to effectively respond to women’s specific needs and empower them to be part of the decision-making processes at all levels;
- b) Organize awareness-raising campaigns at national and local levels about water and sanitation challenges faced by some segments of the population (i.e. people living in slum and rural areas), with the aim of preventing social discrimination and stigmatization;
- c) Plan and implement projects, eventually in partnership with private sectors, to build sanitation facilities in disadvantaged areas of the country and guarantee the full participation of the population concerned to ensure the sustainability of the projects;
- d) Conduct awareness-raising campaigns targeted at people living in disadvantaged areas in order to promote the importance of saving and efficiently managing rainwater to improve their health and their quality of life, in particular Ethiopia;

⁵ Id. Para 17.

- e) Facilitate the dialogue between the population affected by industrial wastes and all businesses involved so as to holistically address the issue of the contamination of water - in particular in Kenya, Zimbabwe, and Zambia - and comply with the obligation to protect.