

## Editor's comment

### Development goals



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Environmental sustainability is one section of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Within this section, Goal 7 is to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Recently the UN has claimed that this goal has been met three years early. But has it?

Writing in *New Scientist* recently, Fred Pearce reports that experts say that the target has been weakened since it was agreed by the UN General Assembly in 2000.

The problem is that most developing countries do not analyse water to establish whether it is safe to drink. The World Health Organization and UNICEF – who are monitoring the target – judge water as ‘safe’ simply by looking for evidence of improved sources of water such as piped supplies, boreholes and collected rainwater. This undermines the goal because these sources may still be contaminated – even the UN admits this.

The report that came with the announcement of this goal being met states that ‘some of these sources may not be adequately maintained and may not actually provide safe drinking water. As a result, it is likely that the number of people using safe water supplies has been overestimated.’ As Fred Pearce says, this is essentially saying that the target has not been met.

The problems lie, as always, in the maintenance of infrastructure – a problem that appears to bedevil the whole of the developing world. A report issued three years ago by the London-based International Institute for Environment and Development estimated that 50 000 boreholes, pumps and wells set up in Africa to meet the UN target were lying derelict. The focus is on equipment. One report highlights inspection of a village in Burkina Faso, where there are 300 people and a new borehole. Inspectors simply tick the box that says that 300 people have access to improved drinking water – whether or not

the borehole is working and whether or not everyone is using it – regardless of the state of the water from the borehole.

Water economists say that the original goal for access to clean water has been turned into a ‘bureaucratic target’ that does little to improve actual service and pays no attention to the quality of water that people drink.

It has to be said that the number of people drinking unsafe water has been reduced. By the UN’s measure, the proportion of the world’s population still drinking from unimproved water sources such as rivers, ponds and open wells has dropped from 24% in 1990 to 11%. However, the population has grown by 1.7 billion during that time. UN figures indicate that the actual number of people who are drinking from unsafe water sources is still around 780 million – far too many for comfort.

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