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Thirsty in Paradise: UN Drinking Water Report

By Marcel Pauly, Der Spiegel, 24 September 17

Millions of people around the world still don't have secure access to drinking water. A new report shows where the situation is most precarious.

Beautifully lush islands jutting picturesquely out of the turquoise sea with sun glinting off the calm surrounding water: Such are the pictures of the Salomon Islands we have become familiar with from travel brochures. And they are not the kind of images that lead one to suspect that there might be a shortage of fresh water on this island chain located northeast of Australia.

But there is. According to the most [recent statistics](#) compiled by the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), four out of every 10 Salomon Islanders don't have secure access to clean drinking water. This makes the Salomon Islands a member of the small group of countries in which the drinking water situation has not improved, but rather worsened, in the past few years. At the turn of the millennium, only two out of 10 Salomon Islanders lacked access to potable water.

Desalinizing Sea Water Is Laborious and Expensive

The number of people without reliable access to clean water has also risen in other island nations, including the Comoros and Micronesia. Indeed, supplying residents with safe drinking water presents a significant challenge on islands without their own spring waters and with only limited supplies of groundwater. They don't always have a pipeline from the mainland or neighboring islands and desalinization is laborious and expensive. In some cases, people are entirely dependent on rainwater. Natural disasters can also make the situation worse. On the Salomon Islands, for example, a tsunami in 2007 destroyed countless water tanks and freshwater wells were contaminated with saltwater. Tens of thousands of people suddenly no longer had secure access to drinking water.

Quenching Our Thirst

Around the world, 89 percent of the population has access to clean water. According to the definition used by WHO and UNICEF, that means the water isn't contaminated and can be consumed without boiling, it comes from a reliable pipe or well and it is available at any time either on one's own property or nearby.

Despite the recent setbacks seen in some island nations, the overall situation is improving year after year. Indeed, the UN's goal of universal access to clean drinking water by 2030 -- in accordance with its Sustainable Development Goals -- appears to be within reach. A deeper look at the statistics, though, reveals where improvements are necessary. And the problems aren't just confined to the South Pacific.

The Vast Disparity between City and Country

Significant disparities become apparent when urban and rural populations are examined separately. They are particularly vast in countries in Africa and Oceania. Whereas at least two-thirds of urban populations have access to clean water, that number can plunge to less than a third in rural areas, where most of the population lives.

Wells and pipelines must be monitored and maintained, a difficult proposition in the countryside, where the necessary technical expertise often isn't available locally. Unrest and

civil war can also lead to water pipes being damaged or insufficiently maintained.

Worldwide, 95 percent of city dwellers have access to clean water while that number is only 80 percent for those living in rural areas. In recent years, the situation has constantly improved while little progress has been seen in cities. Should that trend continue, rural access to clean water should catch up to that in urban areas in about 20 years.

Inadequate Sanitation

But access to drinking water isn't enough. People also need toilets so that excrement can be safely disposed of. They need soap to wash themselves and women need pads, tampons or similar items. These minimum hygienic requirements are also listed in the UN Sustainable Development Goals under the category of "water." By 2030, everyone in the world is to have access to adequate sanitation.

This part of the goal seems considerably less realistic. Only 68 percent of people in the world currently have access to sanitary facilities that meet UN standards. In rural areas, it's just one in two -- and this isn't just negative outliers, but rather the global average.

When it comes to sanitation the situation is also improving -- though at a much slower rate. Indeed, it may take several decades before everyone in the world has sufficient access to proper sanitation.