

UNICEF plays large role in global safe water forum



Students wash their hands with soap and water at Ban Pho Primary School in Bac Han District in Viet Nam

18 August 2009 – With access to water becoming more challenging every year due to rising demand and unreliable supplies, global experts are **meeting** in Stockholm this week in a United Nations-backed forum aimed at tackling the adverse impact on poverty, health, education, gender equality and the environment.

The UN Children’s Fund (**UNICEF**) is playing a significant role at the week-long meeting, organized by the Stockholm International Water Institute, highlighting successful strategies it has introduced in a world where almost one billion people lack access to safe water.

These include its “WASH in Schools” programme, founded on the belief that access to water and sanitation in the classroom is a prerequisite for basic education. The programme has spread from 22 countries in 2002 to 88 countries last year.

“Without access to WASH in school facilities, children will not continue to attend, and they will be hampered in terms of their education outcomes,” says UNICEF WASH in Schools adviser Murat Sahin.

Globally, more than 50 per cent of schools lack access to a safe water supply, while nearly two thirds have no access to sanitation facilities. “It is alarming,” Mr. Sahin says, noting that national policy-makers need to invest in physical WASH infrastructure in addition to resources such as hygiene education and curriculum.

Currently, only 27 countries have a national action plan for child-friendly water sanitation facilities. **UNICEF** has identified 60 countries as priorities for the implementation of the WASH in Schools programme by the year 2015.

In Bangladesh, providing sanitary latrines in schools has helped boost girls’ enrolment by 11 per cent. Studies in India show a resulting improvement in academic performance of up to 25 per cent.

The WASH in Schools approach is not confined to the classroom; it also provides outreach potential. The schools practising good hygiene and sanitation are catalysts for community-wide behaviour change. Nepal, Sierra Leone and Pakistan have all adopted a “School-Led Total Sanitation” model to put students at the centre of a social movement towards improved health.

"The children who get the messages reach out to peers, they reach out to siblings in the household and also to the community with the message of the importance of hygiene practices, as well as know-how of the importance of sanitation and water supply technologies," Mr. Sahin says.

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