



# Human Development Report 2006

**Beyond scarcity:**  
Power, poverty and the global water crisis



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### **The Human Development Report Office (HDRO)**

The *Human Development Report* is the product of a collective effort. Members of the National Human Development Report (NHDR) team provide detailed comments and advice throughout the research process. They also link the Report to a global Human Development Report network in developing countries. The NHDR team, led by Sarah Burd-Sharps (Deputy Director), comprises Amie Gaye, Sharmila Kurukulasuriya, Hanna Schmitt and Timothy Scott. The HDRO administrative team makes the office function and includes Oscar Bernal, Mamaye Gebretsadik, Melissa Hernandez, Fe Juarez and Mary Ann Mwangi. Operations are managed by Sarantuya Mend. HDRO's outreach and advocacy programme is managed by Marisol Sanjines.



# Foreword

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Human development is first and foremost about allowing people to lead a life that they value and enabling them to realize their potential as human beings. The normative framework for human development is today reflected in the broad vision set out in the Millennium Development Goals, the internationally agreed set of time-bound goals for reducing extreme poverty, extending gender equality and advancing opportunities for health and education. Progress towards these objectives provides a benchmark for assessing the international community's resolve in translating commitments into action. More than that, it is a condition for building shared prosperity and collective security in our increasingly interdependent world.

This year's *Human Development Report* looks at an issue that profoundly influences human potential and progress towards the Millennium Development Goals. Throughout history human progress has depended on access to clean water and on the ability of societies to harness the potential of water as a productive resource. Water for life in the household and water for livelihoods through production are two of the foundations for human development. Yet for a large section of humanity these foundations are not in place.

The word *crisis* is sometimes overused in development. But when it comes to water, there is a growing recognition that the world faces a crisis that, left unchecked, will derail progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and hold back human development. For some, the global water crisis is about absolute shortages of physical supply. This Report rejects this view. It argues that the roots of the crisis in water can be traced to poverty, inequality and unequal power relationships, as well as flawed water management policies that exacerbate scarcity.

Access to water for life is a basic human need and a fundamental human right. Yet in our increasingly prosperous world, more than 1 billion

people are denied the right to clean water and 2.6 billion people lack access to adequate sanitation. These headline numbers capture only one dimension of the problem. Every year some 1.8 million children die as a result of diarrhoea and other diseases caused by unclean water and poor sanitation. At the start of the 21st century unclean water is the world's second biggest killer of children. Every day millions of women and young girls collect water for their families—a ritual that reinforces gender inequalities in employment and education. Meanwhile, the ill health associated with deficits in water and sanitation undermines productivity and economic growth, reinforcing the deep inequalities that characterize current patterns of globalization and trapping vulnerable households in cycles of poverty.

As this Report shows, the sources of the problem vary by country, but several themes emerge. First, few countries treat water and sanitation as a political priority, as witnessed by limited budget allocations. Second, some of the world's poorest people are paying some of the world's highest prices for water, reflecting the limited coverage of water utilities in the slums and informal settlements where poor people live. Third, the international com-

munity has failed to prioritize water and sanitation in the partnerships for development that have coalesced around the Millennium Development Goals. Underlying each of these problems is the fact that the people suffering the most from the water and sanitation crisis—poor people in general and poor women in particular—often lack the political voice needed to assert their claims to water.

These and other issues are carefully examined in the Report. The challenges it sets out are daunting. But the authors do not offer a counsel of despair. As the evidence makes clear, this is a battle that we can win. Many countries have made extraordinary progress in providing clean water and sanitation. Across the developing world people living in slums and rural villages are providing leadership by example, mobilizing resources and displaying energy and innovation in tackling their problems. At the start of the 21st century we have the finance, technology and capacity to consign the water and sanitation crisis to history just as surely as today's rich countries did a century ago. What has been lacking is a concerted drive to extend access to water and sanitation for all through well designed and properly financed national plans, backed by a global plan of action to galvanize political will and mobilize resources.

Water for livelihoods poses a different set of challenges. The world is not running out of water, but many millions of its most vulnerable people live in areas subject to mounting water stress. Some 1.4 billion people live in river basins in which water use exceeds recharge rates. The symptoms of overuse are disturbingly clear: rivers are drying up, groundwater tables are falling and water-based ecosystems are being rapidly degraded. Put bluntly, the world is running down one of its most precious natural resources and running up an unsustainable ecological debt that will be inherited by future generations.

Far more also needs to be done in the face of the threats to human development posed by climate change. As the Report stresses, this is not a future threat. Global warming is already happen-

ing—and it has the potential in many countries to roll back human development gains achieved over generations. Reduced water supplies in areas already marked by chronic water stress, more extreme weather patterns and the melting of glaciers are part of the looming challenge. Multilateral action to mitigate climate change by reducing carbon emissions is one leg of the public policy response for meeting that challenge. The other is a far stronger focus on supporting adaptation strategies.

It is already clear that competition for water will intensify in the decades ahead. Population growth, urbanization, industrial development and the needs of agriculture are driving up demand for a finite resource. Meanwhile, the recognition is growing that the needs of the environment must also be factored in to future water use patterns. Two obvious dangers emerge. First, as national competition for water intensifies, people with the weakest rights—small farmers and women among them—will see their entitlements to water eroded by more powerful constituencies. Second, water is the ultimate fugitive resource, traversing borders through rivers, lakes and aquifers—a fact that points to the potential for cross-border tensions in water-stressed regions. Both dangers can be addressed and averted through public policies and international cooperation—but the warning signs are clearly visible on both fronts.

This Report, a product of research and analysis by international experts and staff across the UN system, is intended to stimulate debate and dialogue around a set of issues that will have a profound bearing on progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals and human development.



Kemal Derviş  
Administrator  
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The analysis and policy recommendations of this Report do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations Development Programme, its Executive Board or its Member States. The Report is an independent publication commissioned by UNDP. It is the fruit of a collaborative effort by a team of eminent consultants and advisers and the *Human Development Report* team. Kevin Watkins, Director of the Human Development Report Office, led the effort.

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Kevin Watkins  
Director

*Human Development Report 2006*

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