

Speech by His Royal Highness Prince Willem-Alexander of the Netherlands, Chairman of the United Nations Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation (UNSGAB)

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Mr. Secretary-General, Mr. Under-Secretary-General, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honor and a pleasure to be with you today and to officially launch the UN International Year of Sanitation 2008.

Of course, you are all now about to listen attentively to my speech – but maybe some of you are a little distracted because nature calls and when the break comes, those of us who ‘need to go’ will probably try to hit the restroom as quickly as possible.

But suppose there were no toilets in the building? And suppose you had to relieve yourself in the streets of New York? There's no way you could find a quiet, secluded spot here. And suppose we could smell excrement, because the city of New York had no money to build and maintain a proper sewer system?

Ladies and gentlemen, you may ask yourselves: why do we need an International Year of Sanitation?

This is why: because you and I are not confronted with the world-wide sanitation crisis. We have our own toilets, we don't have to live with the appalling smell caused by the human waste of the entire neighborhood, and we and our children are not at risk from waterborne diseases. We also know what personal hygiene means and why it is important, and we can choose between hot and cold running water to wash our hands and between soft, pink or three-ply toilet paper.

As long ago as 1925 Mahatma Gandhi wrote: “The cause of many of our diseases is the condition of our lavatories and our bad habit of disposing of excreta anywhere and everywhere”. And he had no hesitation saying that in his view sanitation was more important than independence.

Ladies and gentlemen,
Clean water and sanitation are not only about hygiene and disease, they're about dignity, too. Relieving yourself in hazardous places means risking everything from urological disease to harassment and rape. Many examples show that self-esteem begins with having a safe and proper toilet facility.

That is why we, as policymakers, opinion leaders and stakeholders gathered here today, must make a supreme effort to make proper sanitation accessible and available to

everyone. Because everyone, and that means ALL the people in the world, has the right to a healthy life and a life with dignity. In other words: everyone has the right to sanitation.

But at the current rate of progress, we will not reach our MDG target on sanitation before 2026! And it could take another hundred years to reach the target in sub-Saharan countries, which means that an additional 133 million African children will die if nothing changes.

Enough of the staggering statistics. Now is the time for action. “Sanitation for All” also implies “All for Sanitation!!”

So ladies and gentlemen, what do we want to achieve in this Year of Sanitation and how do we achieve it?

We want to raise awareness of the importance of sanitation and its impact on other Millennium Development Goals.

We want to encourage government and their partners to implement policies and take action aimed at meeting the sanitation target.

We want to mobilize communities, particularly women’s groups, to change sanitation and hygiene practice through campaigns on sanitation and health education.

And we also want to encourage technical, social and financial innovation. We must focus our full attention on developing new technologies to dispose of and re-use human waste and waste water. The rapid growth of the world’s population means increased urbanization, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. Let us not forget that more than half the world’s population lives in cities, with over one billion people in slums. And in these areas, water supply and sanitation conditions are downright appalling.

Our prime aim is to provide as many people as possible with proper, sustainable sanitation facilities and to stress how to use them sustainably. So we should revisit the technological options contributing to the Millennium Development Goal’s, for example by including a count of public toilets. I would like to ask the WHO and UNICEF to look into this matter more thoroughly.

Several technological innovations have already been realized. For example ecologically sound re-use options like urine diversion toilets which enable the collection, hygienization and reuse of urine and human excreta.

And we should encourage cheaper small-bore sewerage systems, pit emptying facilities, low-cost septic tank sludge treatment methods and the development and marketing of biogas technologies which can help supply many poor households with energy.

Sulabh International showed me a good example during my recent visit to New Delhi. This organization has proved how effective small-scale solutions can be and how they can be extended all over India within a short time span. Thousands of 'pay & use' public toilet-cum-bath complexes and more than a million pour-flush latrines in private houses have been built (and are maintained), and they are used by more than ten million people every day. By doing so, Sulabh has restored human dignity and a new future to thousands of 'untouchables'.

In India I also saw the positive results of the Total Sanitation Campaign, a good example of social innovation implemented by the Indian government. This community-led approach works to end the practice of 'open defecation' in the community as a whole and to promote the use of latrines. Bangladesh and Ethiopia are now also implementing this comprehensive sanitation campaign that combines community pressure and government rewards.

As I have said, sanitation is important to human health and dignity. But let's not forget its contribution to development. Every dollar invested in water and sanitation triggers seven dollars worth of productive activity. And good money can be made from sanitation, through the production of fertilizers and soil improvers derived from human excreta. In this way, innovative sanitation technologies can help the poorest people break out of the cycle of poverty and raise their dignity and social status.

Ladies and gentlemen, I don't think money is the biggest issue. If we take a collective decision to provide water and sanitation, the money will follow. The problem is largely one of priority and political will. This is the challenge I'm working on in my capacity as Chair of UNSGAB. I'm convinced that the International Year of Sanitation will significantly contribute to the setting of political agendas and thus trigger follow-up and acceleration to the 2015 target.

The G8 conference in Japan in July 2008 is a great opportunity for the world's most powerful countries to tackle our planet's most urgent development crisis. Before that, CSD16 here in New York next May, under the responsibility of Under-Secretary-General Sha Zukang, will also provide an opportunity to stress the importance of good water management and to take action accordingly. As a direct action of the chair of UNSGAB, I will do my utmost to get water and sanitation high on the agenda of both events.

Before I finish, I want to thank the Secretary-General, UNDESA, the inter-agency Task Force, and all the stakeholders and participants for all your work to make the coming International Year of Sanitation possible.

And ladies and gentlemen, I would like to encourage you, with all my heart, to work together. It is of the utmost importance for us to undertake a long-term commitment today to reach our common goals and to work towards health, dignity and development for all.

Everyone has the right to sanitation. No one should have to squat in the street or an open field!

Thank you.