

Relief groups push water projects: Clean water is not an inexhaustible resource

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A fledgling coalition of religious groups is trying to show Americans that for too many people worldwide, clean drinking water isn't as close as the kitchen tap. With more than 1 billion people in developing countries lacking readily available safe drinking water and 2.6 billion without access to sanitation, the faith community is stepping up efforts to push for clean and accessible water.

That effort was under way even as the United Nations painted a near-apocalyptic picture of global warming disasters with hundreds of millions running short of water and food. The second of four reports by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was issued April 6.

"There is a growing realization in most of the mainline churches and faith-based groups that the environment is part of God's creation, and humans have a responsibility to sustain it," said Dennis Warner, a water specialist at Baltimore-based Catholic Relief Services.

"In a sense there has to be a partnership between the Creator and human beings to sustain the environment. . . . It's a moral pact, it's a moral responsibility."

Statistics collected by Water Advocates, a Washington-based advocacy group, are sobering:

- UNICEF says 4,500 children die each day because of diarrhea (from dirty water) or dehydration (from lack of water). The average child in Guatemala suffers from diarrhea 12 times a year.
- The average woman in Africa walks six kilometers each day, and African women spend 40 billion hours each year collecting water—time not spent on other tasks.

- Unsanitary water is a leading cause of fatal illnesses in developing countries, contributing to cholera, typhoid, guinea worm, trachoma (blindness) and diarrhea. Thirty percent of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals hinge in some way on access to clean water.

“Water is significant in the biblical tradition; it’s significant in our theological traditions,” said Marty Shupack, associate director for public policy at Church World Service, a New York-based relief agency affiliated with the National Council of Churches.

Shupack chairs the six-month-old Water Working Group, a loose coalition that was created to bring faith-based communities together to attack the water crisis. Along with Water Advocates, the group is pressuring Congress to increase spending on sustainable water and sanitation efforts by \$500 million.

While conservationists are increasing the pressure on Capitol Hill, they must tackle a more basic problem: Americans’ inability to grasp the idea that water is limited. “We tend to view water as almost an inexhaustible resource, but it’s not,” said Warner.

Catholic Relief Services is currently staffing drinking water projects in 30 countries. In arid sub-Saharan Africa it has used diesel- and hand-powered drills to bore holes to retrieve groundwater. Mountainous areas in Ethiopia and Kenya can harness gravity to pipe water down from the heights into communities.

In Latin America, CRS is organizing rainwater-harvesting projects. Rain is gathered from metal and clay rooftops and used as drinking water rather than becoming runoff. Rainwater also can be collected into human-made ponds to serve as a longer-term source of drinking water (and protein if fish are added).

Water conservationists at Church World Service emphasize incorporating the community in planning and implementing the water projects. That way, the help will last long after aid workers leave the area. *-Religion News Service*