Water Availability in Sub-Saharan Africa

The 38 countries that make up Sub-Saharan Africa represent are in many ways diverse and evolving. Many of the countries gained independence from colonial rulers less than 50 years ago and since have gone through difficult growing pains. The post-colonial period in the region’s history has been marked with struggles against brutal dictatorial regimes, nature in the form of droughts and floods and economic hardship that has left those who live there in extreme poverty. One major problem that is the result of these struggles, among others, is the health crisis facing nearly all of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region. A lack of access to clean water for most in the region affects the health of millions in the form of cholera, schistosomiasis, diarrhea, Guinea worm disease, intestinal worms and trachoma. Malnutrition caused by inadequate food production due, in part, to low water resources exacerbates the health problems of many, especially children who die before their fifth birthday in Sub-Saharan Africa at a higher rate than anywhere else in the world.

UNICEF estimated that in 2004 just 55% of Sub-Saharan Africa had access to improved drinking water and only 44% in rural areas of the region. How is it that after years of foreign aid and investment in infrastructure projects in the region there still are so many suffering and becoming ill from bad drinking water? The answer is a combination of changing climate, the aforementioned bad government and bad planning and allocation of resources. For example, of the roughly 980 large dams in Sub-Saharan Africa, almost 600 are in 1 country (South Africa).

More important, though, than asking why the problem is so severe is seeking ways to remedy it. Firstly, proper resource management and planning practices must be followed when distributing water. Many larger projects have either failed or been abandoned as expected incomes and funding dried up. To avoid this, many suggest working at the grassroots level to find appropriate solutions for the masses of poor people, rather than legislate from the top down. Recent successful projects have been in irrigation for small scale farmers and in hygiene education, but large water distribution projects have been few.

There are arguments about the efficacy of international aid to solve the problems that the region faces. Years of international aid have had positive affects, but some suggest the funds have enabled rampant government corruption that has halted economic growth and led to great instability. Perhaps in no area could the funds and investment be better spent than in projects to provide access to clean drinking water. In an area that accounts for 90% of all malaria cases and 2 out of 3 AIDS cases worldwide, access to basic needs like water is the first step in improving people’s health.

Some Statistics about Sub-Saharan Africa:
In 1990, 48% of the population had access to improved drinking water (82% urban areas, 35% rural).
In 2004, 55% of the population had access to improved drinking water (81% urban, 41% rural).
If current trends continue to 2015, the absolute number of people without an improved drinking water source will decline by 150 million; sub-Saharan Africa will end up with 47 million more un-served than in 2004.
In Ethiopia, 22% of the population has access to a safe source of water.

Sources:
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