The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for water and sanitation are really quite modest. In the 1980s, the world set the goal of water and sanitation for all by 1990. A few years before that, in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977, access to safe water had been recognized as a universal human right - by definition a right of all people in all countries.

In contrast, our goals today are only to halve the proportions without affordable access to safe water and adequate sanitation by 2015. True, these are minimum targets and some countries like South Africa managed to achieve the goal of halving those without access to safe water in only seven years and have now fixed 2008 as the goal for complete coverage or water, and 2010 for sanitation.

Pay and use in India

There are hundreds of clean "pay and use" public toilets in a dozen major cities and more than a million household latrines. For over 20 years, Sulabh International has pioneered innovative approaches which have proved their effectiveness - and released more than 35,000 "scavengers" and their families from the dirty and degrading work of cleaning out bucket privies and other latrines. Backing up these social innovations is a programme of technologies - encouraging the 'twin pit' household latrine, which has the benefits of the VIP model with additional advantage of built-in on-site disposal, eliminating surface and sub-soil pollution and requiring only a seventh of the water needed for conventional flushing. Seeing is believing as I can verify from my own experience.

The walk of shame in Bangladesh

Some 100 communities have cleaned up their villages to achieve "100 percent sanitation". This is a new approach, focused not on individuals, but on the whole village. It shows how, as a community, they can deal with their sanitation challenge together.

Kamal Kar summarises the fascinating details, many counter-intuitive: no subsidies, no standard model, no counting up all the latrines constructed. Instead, field staff of the Village Education Resource Centre go on a village walk with as many of the locals as possible, analysing the sanitation problems, checking the status of latrines. Often it becomes a "walk of shame" that prompts the community to form a water and sanitation committee and draft an action plan. After that, the goal is "100% sanitation", but individuals are left to decide themselves what sort of latrine. More than 20 new toilet models have emerged, some costing the equivalent of only US$ 1.27 per unit.

In short, global goals can help, more than is often recognized. A broader review of performance and outcomes in relation to some 50 global goals set by the UN over the last four decades, shows that most goals have been "largely" or "considerably" achieved - meaning that some 30 to 50 developing countries covering a third or more of the developing world’s population have realised the target by the target date or soon after.

Global goals have also made a difference in building capacity in the developing countries, encouraging a focused approach in development planning and instilling cost consciousness in operations. Few global goals have been total failures - though the 0.7 per cent goals for aid (Official Development Assistance) stands out as one of the goals least achieved - along with halving maternal mortality by 2000, and ending global hunger within a decade, set at the World Food Conference in 1974.

What now will it take to achieve the water goal set at the Millennium Summit in 2000 and the sanitation goal agreed at the Johannesburg summit last September? Seven steps are vital:

All countries need to prepare National Plans of Action with their own targets adopted and adapted in relation to local conditions.
All countries need to put sufficient resources in government budgets to ensure enough catalytic support to get action underway in line with the targets and enough to ensure sustained action for the next decade, along with provision for effective systems of maintenance. Government does not have to pay for everything – it must give the lead.

More effective ways have to be found to empower women and strengthen their influence in decision-making, on planning, maintenance and management of water and sanitation systems. Aid donors can help by providing their own catalytic support and encouragement within the framework of long-term commitment. Ideally, there also needs to be firm commitment or at least understanding of some extra support to maintain the momentum of a good programme, especially if a country is knocked off course by unforeseen difficulties like natural disasters, or, equally likely, by a price collapse of one or more of its exports.

Another new direction is synergy with the other Millennium Development Goals. Much more can be achieved if building momentum in water and sanitation is linked to action and support for all the goals, as part of a broad thrust to poverty reduction on a national and global scale.

Children and youth as agents of change is another new direction. If schools and places of worship can show the importance of basic hygiene to children, they will spread the message at home. But for this to be effective, the school must enable children to practice what the school preaches. Separate latrines for girls and boys are a must – and a goal of the WASH campaign for 2010.

Finally, partnership and coalition. UN-HABITAT is one UN agency which leads in partnerships. The Urban WASH (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) campaign of UN-HABITAT and WSSCC is a close partnership which hopefully will enable both to be pioneers in the creation of a coalition between the local bodies and governments on one hand, and civil society on the other. Unless people are really brought into the centre of all planning, action and implementation, the real goal will never be achieved and it will not be sustainable.

A new awareness through African Ministerial Council on Water and the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) has helped a large number of African countries to develop the partnership approach through WASH campaigns in Madagascar, Uganda, South Africa, Senegal, and Nigeria. Kenya is making new efforts to develop a special approach to the urban problems in Nairobi and other areas.

All the MDGs are important. Achieving one will help achieve another. Ensuring the achievement of the hygiene, sanitation and water goals will not only improve health, it will reduce child mortality and ease the burden on women and girls, leaving them free time and energy for other efforts towards poverty reduction and for girls to attend school.

Because of this, UN-HABITAT, like all other supporters of the hygiene, sanitation and water goals, needs to advocate for all the MDGs, and to put water and sanitation issues at the centre of all goals. Such a partnership of international actions should be created by leaders like UN-HABITAT to create a more enabling environment without which it will not be possible for most poorer countries to achieve the goals: accelerated debt relief, improved access to developed country markets for their exports, and better focused aid.

In a world so prone to conflict, action is needed to show the risks of destroying or poisoning facilities on which millions the world over depend for safe water and sanitation. A partnership of international action is also needed to create a more enabling environment to achieve the goals. The new UN-HABITAT-WSSCC WASH campaign will go a long way to demonstrate how much positive human energy can be released when people are at the centre of all activities towards achieving the goals.

Sir Richard Jolly is the Chair, Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council. For further information see www.wsscc.org

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**New initiatives in Africa**

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**Cost-effective designs in Bolivia**

A joint venture between the Bolivian government, a private water and sewerage supplier, the World Bank and the Swedish International Development Agency used construction training and hygiene education to improve sanitation and hygiene practices in the city of El Alto. By using cost-effective designs and involving the community in the construction of the water and sewerage networks, connection costs were reduced by around 40 per cent. Households receiving hygiene education were twice as likely to construct a bathroom in their homes and significantly reduced unsanitary practices such as throwing used water into the streets or recycling water within the home.

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*In the community there is no sanitation, and the water that we use is clandestine. In other words, we don’t exist either for the municipal or for the state government. We want to feel part of the city and participate in the decisions related to the place where we live.*

— Deusimar da Costa, a resident of the Inácio Dias slum in Rio de Janeiro.