



## Water, Sanitation and the Millennium Development Goals: A Report Card on Global Progress

*By Joan B. Rose, PhD*

In 2000, the United Nations adopted a set of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to improve the lives of the poorest people on Earth. As the 15-year MDG timeline runs out, a [final report](#) on this ambitious program reflects both mixed success and overall optimism. Given the importance of safe drinking water and sanitation to improving the human condition, we assessed two crucial MDG targets under MDG #7 (Ensure Environmental Sustainability) in the following “report card”.

*Drinking Water: Halve the proportion of the population without improved drinking water between 1990 and 2015*

The great news is that this target was met *five years early*, in 2010! The UN reports 91 percent of the global population now uses an “improved drinking water source” compared to 76 percent in 1990. Of the 2.6 billion people who have gained access to improved drinking water since 1990, 1.9 billion (73%) gained access to on-premises piped drinking water. Fifty-eight percent of the global population now has access to this type of drinking water service.

One hundred forty-seven countries<sup>1</sup> have met the drinking water target, including nations in Eastern Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, South-Eastern Asia, Southern Asia and Western Asia. Sub-Saharan Africa did not achieve the drinking water target, but demonstrated a 20 percent gain in access to improved water sources. Worldwide, urban dwellers have better access (96%) to improved water sources than rural residents (84%).

Unfortunately, 663 million people still use unimproved drinking water sources; nearly half of these live in sub-Saharan Africa, while one-fifth live in South Asia. Nevertheless, global progress has been excellent, and must continue. We assign a grade of “A” to progress toward this important global target.

*Sanitation: Halve the proportion of the population without sanitation between 1990 and 2015*



*Graphic from UN Millennium Development Goals and Beyond 2015 [website](#)*

<sup>1</sup> The United Nations includes [193 member states](#).

Ninety-five nations have met the sanitation target. Although 2.1 billion people gained access to improved sanitation between 1990 and the present, and the global proportion of people practicing open defecation has been nearly halved, sanitation remains a significant global challenge. Worldwide, one in three people (2.4 billion) still use unimproved sanitation facilities, including 946 million people who practice open defecation. There is a sharp contrast between urban (82%) and rural (50%) access to improved sanitation facilities.

Based on these statistics, we assign a grade of “C” to progress toward the sanitation target. Further improvements in sanitation can produce profound results. We note there is a significant benefit to drinking water quality from improved sanitation. When human waste is properly channeled and treated, the risk of infecting drinking water sources is reduced. Additionally, ending open defecation may reduce childhood malnutrition and stunted growth (see [Poor Sanitation: The Startling Link to Childhood Malnutrition](#)).

### *Looking Ahead*

Measuring progress against statistical goals is essential to prioritizing action. As the MDG timeline expires, a new set of sustainable development goals for the UN Post-2015 Development Agenda is set to be adopted this September, with a new deadline of 2030. Seventeen new, more specific, scientific and measureable goals will build upon the MDGs. Goal #6 of the 17, is “Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all,” and includes targets covering topics such as water quality and open defecation. Indicators for the new targets will be set by March, 2016. We think these could be as specific as measuring a chlorine residual in stored and delivered drinking water to help ensure safety.

We endorse the progress made to date to achieve the MDGs. We underscore the overarching value of clean drinking water and sanitation in improving human life on Earth and the need for further progress toward these critical global goals.

*Joan B. Rose, PhD, is the Homer Nowlin Chair in Water Research at Michigan State University and a member of the Water Quality and Health Council.*