

Time running out as Africa sprints towards MDG deadline



More than 8 out of 10 Africans without access to improved drinking water sources live in rural areas.

WaterAid/Layton Thompson

African nations are racing to meet the 2015 deadline set by the United Nations (UN) to halve the number of people without access to basic water and sanitation. But will the continent's slow start be the spoke in the wheel of its success? Lani van Vuuren reports from the Second Africa Water Week.

The Second Africa Water Week, held in Midrand in November last year, brought together decision-makers, UN agencies, civil society groups, the private sector and development cooperation partners to discuss ways of

addressing the continent's water and sanitation challenges. The event was held in response to the Sharm El Sheikh Commitments on water and sanitation adopted by the African Union Heads of State in Egypt in 2008.

While 26 individual African countries are on track to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to halve the number of people without access to drinking water, the continent as a whole is lagging far behind. The MDGs were set up by the UN in 2000. These goals establish quantitative benchmarks to halve extreme poverty in all its forms.

According to the *WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) for Water and Sanitation*, around 600 million Africans have access to improved drinking



Groundwater access is by far the fastest growing source of water supply for both urban and rural households in Africa.

water (2006 figures). That is 64% of the total population of the continent. Coverage of improved drinking water sources is highest in southern Africa (92%) and northern Africa (88%). In central, eastern and western Africa coverage of drinking water sources is still below 60%.

To meet the MDGs, coverage needs to increase across the continent to 78% by 2015. That means that, on average, 33 million people need to gain access to an improved drinking water source every year. Even when the drinking water

target is met, 253 million Africans will still be without access to an improved drinking water source.

Urban residents remain much more fortunate than their rural counterparts. About 57 million people living in Africa's cities have no access to improved water sources compared to the estimated 284 million unserved people living in rural areas.

When drinking water is not available on the premises, women shoulder the bulk of the water collection responsibility, and it often takes considerable time to fetch the water. According to the *JMP*, women are more than five times as likely as men to usually go to a source and collect drinking water for the household. In every one in seven households, children (boys and girls) are the main water collectors for the household.

With regards to sanitation Africa also faces steep challenges. The target is to provide improved sanitation to 63% of the region's population. That is about 370 million more than the estimated 242 million that were using such facilities in 2006. Still the continent has made remarkable progress. Access to basic sanitation facilities across Africa has increased by over 80% since 1990. At present six African countries are on target to meet the MDGs on sanitation.

As HRH Prince William of Orange, chair of the UN Secretary-General's Advisory Board on Water and Sanitation, pointed out, while the figures remain bleak, African countries have done much to improved access to services in the last few years. "[Halving the percentage of the population without access] is a far bigger job for a country that started off with a very high percentage of people lacking access to safe water and sanitation, and even harder if the population in the meantime is growing rapidly."

"Africa is making impressive progress on water and sanitation," noted Prince William. "For example, at least 17 African countries are outperforming the global average rate for expanding access to basic sanitation, while 21 African countries are performing above average for water supply."

South African Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs, Buyelwa Sonjica, said that the continent's water crisis and policy challenges were now broadly recognised as central to the developmental agenda. "Already African Heads of State have at the highest level demonstrated political commitment to the development of the water and sanitation sectors."

However, the minister admits that Africa has now reached the point where there needs to be a greater convergence



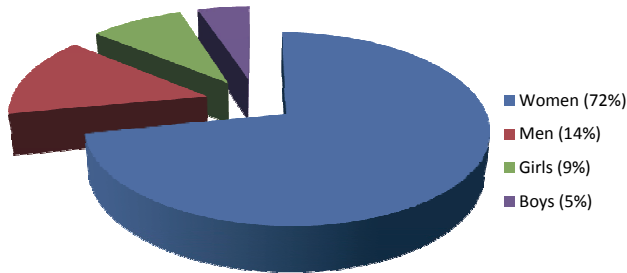
Left: South African Minister of Water & Environmental Affairs Buyelwa Sonjica; outgoing President of AMCOW Bruno Jean-Richard Itoua and AMCOW Secretary-General Bai-Mass Taal at the Second Africa Water Week.

Right: In 38 African countries, sanitation coverage is less than 50%.



WaterAid/Layton Thompson

The burden of water collection



between these high-level commitments and delivery through concrete actions, strengthening and scaling up of existing mechanisms and initiatives, and refinement of strategies to close the gaps.

One of the main factors inhibiting Africa's progress is its vast urbanisation rate. Despite some advances, the continent remains the region with the highest prevalence of slums (informal settlements). Both slums and urban areas in the region appear to be growing at an equally rapid rate. As a result, coverage of improved water services is actually falling in Africa's cities.

Another challenge is that of funding. According to a report by the World Bank and African Development Bank, existing spending on water supply and sanitation is nowhere near enough to meet the MDGs – there is a funding gap of US\$9,3-billion a year. International funding has dwindled as a consequence of the global recession, and many African countries are finding it difficult to find the finances needed to advance the rollout of improved services.

Outgoing President of the African Ministers Council on Water (AMCOW), Bruno Jean-Richard Itoua, called on international donors to assist Africa to meet its targets. "We are speaking with one voice [through AMCOW], we know what we can bring to the table and what it is we need. African countries mean business, but we need funding to see it through."

AMCOW is supporting water and sanitation projects through the African Water Facility (AWF), which aims to mobilise financial resources for water sector

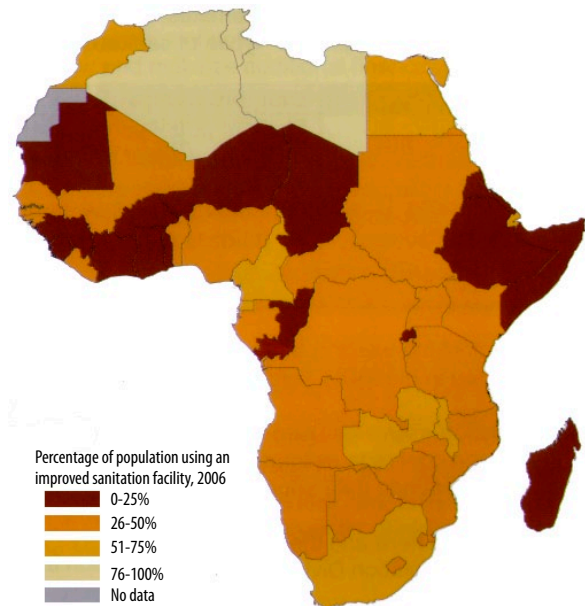
development. Created in 2004, the AWF is hosted by the African Development Bank. To date, €110-million has been raised to support projects in 25 countries.

According to Itoua, African countries also needed to look internally for funding. "We realise that we cannot only rely on donor funding. There needs to be national commitment first and foremost. Finance ministers must be brought into discussions in order to enhance national spending on water and sanitation."

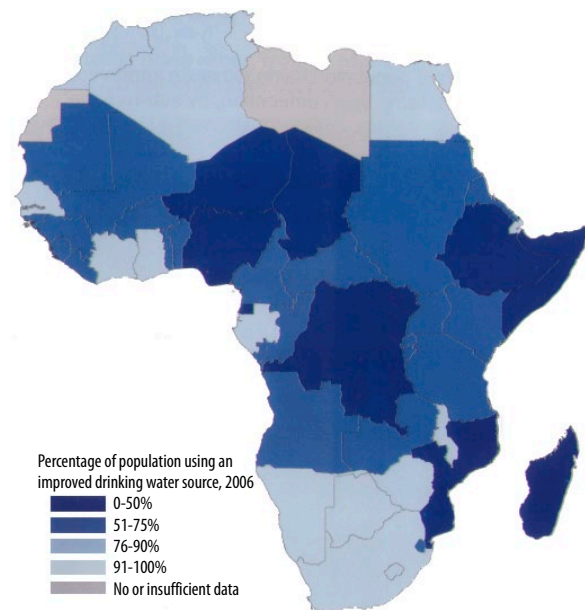
Meeting the MDGs will require greater cooperation between African countries. Nearly all of Africa's surface water resources are contained in its 64 international river basins. These river basins are already home to 77% of Africa's population. "Most international basins are without any shared agreements on equitable use or environmental protection," noted Sonjica. "As a result, procedures for avoiding or resolving international disputes over water are largely lacking."

Amplifying existing challenges is the issue of climate change. Africa as a whole is responsible for only 3% to 5% of global emissions of greenhouse gases, however, is set to be hit hardest by the effects on global climate changes. "Water is where climate change makes its first impacts. Combined with rapidly growing demand for water, the increasing impacts of climate change are creating an alarming scenario," said HRH Prince William. "Water will increasingly shape international relations and security arrangements in Africa."

Despite the hurdles ahead, Itoua remained positive that Africa would



Coverage with improved sanitation facilities, 2006 (Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation).



Coverage with improved drinking water sources, 2006 (Source: WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation).

largely meet the MDGs. "Admittedly we were off to a slow start in this marathon to improve our people's access to water and sanitation. However, with six years to go we are ready to take the lead, sprinting to the finish." 