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# 'We need to talk about open defecation'

If the development community doesn't get serious about sanitation, the shit will hit the fan

**Laura Paddison**

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UN deputy secretary-general Jan Eliasson said 'open defecation' was a major health issue with 2.5bn people living without adequate sanitation. Photograph: Stuart Price/AP

The UN deputy secretary-general, Jan Eliasson, mentioned "open defecation" five times during his speech at the opening plenary of [World Water Week](#) in Stockholm on 2 September. Toilets featured heavily too.

"I stuck my neck out today when I said we have to break taboos because people didn't even mention the word toilet in the UN five years ago." Recalling a recent UN event, he said: "I finished my speech saying we must work for a life with toilets for all. I looked up at the interpreters up in the booths and they looked at me as if to say 'did he really say toilet as the last word in his speech?'"

Eliasson is, of course, entirely unrepentant. As well as his UN role, he is the former chair of WaterAid Sweden. "We need to break taboos," he insists. "We don't speak about [defecation], there's a shame factor which is horrible. It is the most natural of human needs, which causes enormous problems which relate both to health and dignity."

Dignity was a theme running strongly through the speech, during which Eliasson reeled off a string of depressing statistics. Holding up a glass of [water](#) he told the audience: "This is a dream for [768 million people](#)." He spoke of the more than 2.5 billion who live without adequate [sanitation](#), the [25% of people in the least developing world who practise open defecation because they have no toilets](#) and, most starkly, [the 2,000](#)

children who die every day from diarrhoea and other preventable diseases caused by poor sanitation.

"I've seen them die in front of me in Somalia in 1992 and '93, in Darfur in 2007 ... and that's enough for me and others to act." But the statistics in his speech also recognised an economic component to the debate. Inadequate sanitation and water costs \$260bn (£166bn), he says, compared to the \$60bn cost of fulfilling the MDGs on water. And that is the economic case for making sanitation a priority.

"Every pound, dollar or euro you invest [in sanitation], you get five times the return, when you add this element of enlightened self-interest, it's such a great investment in the health not only for individuals but also society."

The economic language seems part of Eliasson's plan to take the water and sanitation debate into new spheres. He said he recently met ministers of finance in Washington. "I sit with development ministers and the NGO sector but here I am with these tough-minded finance ministers. They realised ... sanitation was such a great way of decreasing the costs for health ... It is just the most natural and best investment you can make for your own society."

So what of the future for water in the post-MDG world? While the water goal itself has been achieved, Eliasson had some strong words on the progress of the seventh MDG: sanitation. "The scandal, and I would use that word intentionally, is that we have let sanitation lag so seriously, it is the most lagging of the goals. And the dangers are growing every month because of the very rapid pace of urbanisation, with poor people moving from smaller towns and villages to big cities where they create slums which have no infrastructure investment in sanitation." He referred to the 2012 outbreak of cholera in Sierra Leone as an example, which claimed nearly 300 lives according to UN figures.

"This problem cannot be solved by one actor alone". He called on different sectors to think and act horizontally, not in their usual silos. The public sector, he said, must invest in sanitation and regulate against pollution, the private sector can provide the technology needed to improve sanitation. Eliasson asked civil society to continue to give water, sanitation and hygiene (Wash) high priority in their policies.

Eliasson also referred to the achievements of sanitation and water for all (SWA), a cross-sector initiative of governments, donors and development organisations (including Care and Plan International) focused on sustainable sanitation, as a successful partnership example. "We need to put the problem at the centre and then we should gather those who can influence the problem," he said, to achieve what he called: "a division of labour."

As the UN member states start to focus on the post-2015 sustainable development goals, Eliasson is keen for water to remain high on the agenda. "There has been a proposal that water and sanitation should be a standalone goal and I have great sympathy with that, I hope the member states will go in that direction," he said.

"With investment in water and sanitation you have effects on so many other goals related to health, to gender equality and education – girls don't go to school if they are sick ... or if they have to care for sick children as often women and girls do."

The best way to summarise the situation, he said, is with one phrase: "Water is life, sanitation is dignity."

• Correction: this piece was amended on 12 September 2013, to say that Jan Eliasson is the former chair of WaterAid Sweden, not the current one.