

World Water Day (22 March 2011) - Bringing safe water to communities: the role of the ILO

Despite the UN General Assembly declaring that access to safe water is a human right, thousands die each day because of water-related diseases, and many countries are not expected to meet the UN Millennium Development Goals on water. The ILO is working with governments, employers' and workers' organizations to identify priorities for investment infrastructure in order to create employment opportunities and bring safe water to communities. In advance of World Water Day on 22 March, ILO Online spoke with Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo, ILO Sectoral Specialist for Public Services and Utilities.

03/16/2011

FTR/water

Why has the issue of water become so important on the global agenda?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: Access to water is an important way to reduce poverty in many ways. Safe access to water would avoid more than two million preventable deaths a year, increase many persons' ability to work, and reduce child labour and school absenteeism. Lately, more attention has been placed on the need to adapt to climate changes because they will affect the availability to provide water for all. That's why the United Nations General Assembly declared in 2010 that access to safe water is a human right.

How can the ILO help to bring safe water to communities?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: Coping with the growing needs of water and sanitation services, particularly within cities, is one of the most pressing issues of this century. Employers and workers are actively engaged in water supply. The ILO strongly supports the participation of workers and employers in water utility reforms and employment creation in water infrastructure. Water supply reforms that take into account the social dimensions of the problem tend to gather broad support from workers, employers and citizens. What's more, these activities can help fighting child labour through improved water access.

What are the specific linkages between water and the world of work?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: There are many linkages. To cite just a few: the lack of access to water hinders productive activity and education; climate change has a great impact on water sources and related employment and incomes; and illnesses stemming from unhealthy water reduces productivity and burdens a country's health system.

On the other hand, if the effective provision of rural water infrastructure is guaranteed, this improves access to income earning opportunities. What's more, green jobs can be created by improving water-related infrastructure, including forestation activities.

How does access to water impact on education and child labour?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: Women and children carry most of the supply burden when access to water is not guaranteed. Improving access to basic utilities can be a powerful instrument to reduce child labour and increase school attendance. Two types of basic utilities might seem particularly relevant in this context – water and electricity. A lack of access to water can raise the value of children's time in non-schooling activities, as children are needed to undertake responsibility for water collection or to help cover the cost of purchasing water. Country studies in El Salvador, Ghana, Guatemala, Morocco and Yemen show that the percentage of children working full-time is much higher, and the rate of full-time school attendance is much lower, among children from households without water or electricity access.

What is the ILO contribution to World Water Day?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: On the occasion of World Water Day 2011, UN-Water will hold a worldwide event focusing on urban water management: the ILO will underscore the contribution the world of work can make to long-term solutions in this respect. More particularly, we will hold a world water day-related activity on 18 March 2011 in Tagaytay, in the Philippines. During the event, the ILO will present an action plan to enable workers and employers to assist reforms in the water sector in the Philippines. The plan will explore how water utility companies can partner with employee associations to find concrete ways of establishing an effective partnership leading to quality public services.

What about ILO activities related to water in other countries?

Carlos R. Carrión-Crespo: The ILO is working with governments to identify priorities for investment infrastructure in order to create employment opportunities and bring water to communities. The ILO is also helping governments, workers and employers to promote sustainable and participative water supply reforms in countries like Nigeria, Malawi and Peru to increase access to safe water.

What's more, the ILO's Green Jobs Programme participates in international sustainable development efforts – within the Rio+20 framework and UNFCCC discussions – to ensure that the employment and social dimensions are taken into account. In particular, the ILO promotes a “just transition” of vulnerable workers and households to a world of work transformed by climate change and other environmental challenges.