

OUAGADOUGOU, July 31, 2010 - The government of Burkina Faso has embarked on the construction of 55,000 latrines each year to improve access to proper sanitation for the population from the present 10 percent to 54 percent by 2015.

According to the authorities, the average rate of access to sanitation in urban areas is currently 20 percent, while in rural areas, it is as low as one percent in some areas.

Burkina Faso will invest 24 million dollars in each of the next five years. The government, which now spends \$8 million a year thanks to support from donors, plans to double, even triple its own annual contribution of around \$2 million from the national budget.

"When you look at all sectors, things are moving. But on sanitation, a domain so fundamental to quality of life, we can see that we are very far behind," Laurent Sédogo, Burkinabé minister for agriculture, water and fisheries resources told IPS.

"To put it plainly, out of every 1,000 people, only 100 have adequate (sanitation) infrastructure. The other 900 must take to the bush and, to protect their modesty, many wait until the dead of night because of the loss of vegetation," Sédogo said.

Amélie Ouédraogo, a resident of the Tanghin neighbourhood of the Burkinabé capital Ouagadougou, said that construction of latrines will permit the dead to regain their peace. "Even the cemeteries are not safe when night falls. We see people headed there, but we cannot prevent them from relieving themselves."

According to Ouédraogo, the situation is even more dire during the rainy season, because the water which flows through the streets, a favourite playground for children, is polluted. "We have cases of diarrhoea, but people refuse to make the link between these illnesses and their causes."

Mahamoudou Sana, a merchant in one of Ouaga's livestock markets said, "Once we have latrines, both we and our customers can make ablutions and wash ourselves before prayers. Previously, we had to hide ourselves in tall bush to relieve ourselves during the day."

The ministry of health underlines that the absence of toilets leads to illness, notably diarrhoea, which is responsible for 58 percent of child deaths in Burkina.

According to non-governmental organisation WaterAid, some 2,000 children die every day. The NGO adds that simply using toilets could reduce the incidence of diarrhoea by 40 percent; clean toilets, combined with safe drinking water and good hygiene, cases of diarrhoea could be reduced by 90 percent.

WaterAid is worried that 90 percent of African nations will not achieve the Millennium Development Goal on sanitation, and says that African heads of state - who re-committed themselves to promoting maternal health at the July summit of the African Union - to resolve

questions of sanitation if they want to reduce child and maternal mortality.

In rural areas, where 80 percent of Burkina Faso's population lives, the government's plan is for 395,000 households to build toilets, as well as the construction of 12,300 public latrines. The programme also foresees 222,000 new household toilets in urban centres, alongside 900 public latrines in schools, health centres, markets and public transit points.

The Burkinabé president, Blaise Compaoré, personally participated in the launch of the campaign, with an eye to enlisting both the general population and international financial partners to make sanitation a national priority.

The government offensive comes after finding that the pace of progress is insufficient to attain the goal on sanitation in a context of rapid population growth. According to the last census in 2006, Burkina Faso's growth rate of three percent is one of the highest in sub-Saharan Africa and the world.

"Across West and Central Africa, coverage in urban areas varies between 30 and 60 percent, while in rural areas the rate is from 1 to 22 percent," says Amah Klutsé, of the Regional Centre for Low-cost Water Supply and Sanitation (known by its French acronym, CREPA).

With headquarters in Ouagadougou, CREPA active in 17 West and Central African countries, where it supports governments in the design and implementation of policy on sanitation and potable water.

"With this display of political will, it seems that action will be taken to achieve (sanitation goals)," Klutsé says.

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