

Safe Water for All

Access to clean drinking water is critical at home & abroad

Interview compiled by Sara Samovalov



Sarina Prabasi is chief executive of WaterAid America. She has 20 years of experience in international development work and most recently served as deputy chief of programs for Orbis Intl. and country representative for WaterAid Ethiopia. Originally from Nepal, she lives in New York City, where she is a proud mother to two young girls and co-founder of fair trade organic coffee company Buunni Coffee. Prabasi can be reached at 212.683.0430.

More than 650 million people worldwide live without access to safe drinking water. Sarina Prabasi, chief executive of WaterAid America—an organization that implements water, sanitation and hygiene practices in the world's poorest countries—is working to change that. W&WD Associate Editor Sara Samovalov spoke with Prabasi about the global water crisis and the lessons it might provide the U.S. in light of the situation in Flint, Mich.

Sara Samovalov: How is it possible that 650 million people lack access to safe drinking water?

Sarina Prabasi: What we find in many places all over the world is that governments have not done enough to ensure that safe water reaches the poorest and most marginalized people in society. In many countries, taps, wells and pipes simply don't exist. But in addition to the physical infrastructure, you need skills, funding, planning [and] political priority, and in many cases that's what's also failing. In other places, existing sources [of water] are no longer available because of climate changes or because of pollution. And almost everywhere, the poorest people end up paying the most, or are the last to be reached with services. In many places, services are not designed or planned for the long term.

Samovalov: What are the implications of living without adequate access to safe drinking water?

Prabasi: Clean water and toilets are a matter of life or death, and they're a question of thirst, hunger or a place to go to the bathroom. But they are also about more than that: Clean water, toilets and hygiene are about opportunity. Without access to clean water and toilets, the world's poorest people will stay poor.

The water and sanitation crisis hits women and girls the hardest. It's estimated that women and girls globally spend 200 million hours every day simply collecting water—time that could be spent getting an education, working in ways that provide income for their families, [being] with their families or contributing to their communities. In a similar vein, millions of girls drop out of school

Making Progress

"The global water crisis is not a new phenomenon," Prabasi said. "What is new is the worldwide commitment to putting an end to this crisis once and for all."

In September 2015, all 193 United Nations member states signed off on 17 Global Goals for Sustainable Development. One of these, Goal 6, aims to ensure worldwide access to water and sanitation by 2030.

Additionally, "globally, the number of people living without access to safe drinking water has in fact been decreasing—we're making progress!" Prabasi said. "Cambodia has made more progress than any other country in the past 15 years, for example, with a 34% increase in the number of people living there who now have access to clean water."

Statistics such as these contribute to Prabasi's "tremendous hope" that water resource management issues can be solved.

"We're not waiting on a cure or a scientific breakthrough; we have the technology, we have the know-how and we have the resources. What's needed now is the political and financial commitment to make it happen," she said.

when they get their periods because there are no private toilets. Around 900 children under the age of five die each day from preventable water- and sanitation-related diseases.

Samovalov: What is the best way to solve this crisis?

Prabasi: While there is no silver bullet, we know what the building blocks of a sustainable water and sanitation system are: government leadership, strong national plans and systems, information systems and mutual accountability, and financing that is transparent and predictable.

Samovalov: What is your take on the Flint crisis?

Prabasi: To live in one of the world's most developed countries and not have access to safe water is inexcusable. Over our years of work with communities worldwide, here's what we've learned: First, the ability of citizens to be heard, and for government and other service providers to be held accountable, is key to [the] sustainable provision of safe water. Second, we've learned that clean water is a universal human right that is disproportionately enjoyed by the wealthy—not unlike many other basic human rights. Third, we've learned that there are no quick fixes. While emergency response and mobilizing swiftly in a crisis is essential, all of the donated dollars and bottled water in the world cannot offer the long-term equitable solutions we need to prevent tragedies like Flint from hitting another town another day.

We know right now in the U.S. there are many other cities that are at risk of becoming the next Flint. We must vow to ensure that what's happened here will never be repeated again. We need to start by recognizing and prioritizing the human right to safe water, and we must do this within a framework of effective and sustainable long-term management of water resources. We need transparent water management, investment in safe, well-maintained infrastructure and community participation and ownership if we are to actually implement our right to safe water. **w&wd**

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