

## THE ENVIRONMENT: KEY ISSUES

# Caring for the Planet, Feeding Our World

### **This information leaflet is in three parts:**

- Page 1 summarises the links between the environment and poverty.
- Page 2 illustrates the links between Millennium Development Goal 7 which focuses on the environment and the other seven MDGs.
- Page 3 provides supplementary information for teachers on the key environmental issues which affect those living in poverty.

### **The links between the environment and poverty:**

Millennium Development Goal 7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability recognises that human well-being depends on a healthy environment. Looking after the environment is essential for producing food and fighting hunger. But, overuse of forests, land, water and fisheries, as well as increased energy use, has caused changes in our environment. These changes often harm the most vulnerable people in the world who depend directly on these resources for their livelihood.

Changes in the environment affect people living in poverty the most. There are **three key links between environmental changes and poverty:**

1. Livelihoods: poorer people tend to be most dependent on their local environment for clean water, food and building materials. They are the most affected when their local environment is damaged, or changes, or when they lose access to resources.
2. Health: Poorer people suffer most when land, water or air is polluted. For example environmental damage reduces the ability of the land to produce crops and sustain livestock. Land which produces less food contributes to risk of hunger, malnutrition and ill-health.
3. Vulnerability: Poor people are most at risk from environmental problems and environment-related conflicts. They have low capacity to cope and adapt when environmental change, natural disaster (e.g. flooding from an earthquake) and conflicts occur.

### **MDG 7 aims to look after the environment so that:**

- It supports the needs of all people now, and in the future, so that people have a good quality of life
- It provides the resources needed for economic development
- It maintains environmental services which support human life (e.g. clean water, clean air and fertile soil to produce food)

**This idea of looking after the environment so that it provides a good quality of life for people, and supports the economy now, and into the future, is known as sustainable development.**

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Livelihood and food supply strategies of the poor often depend directly on the natural environment e.g. firewood for cooking, farming, livestock rearing and fishing. If sources of food and fuel become degraded the poor generally lack the ability to change to another source and are at risk from increased poverty and hunger.



Children gather firewood, collect water or help their families grow crops and tend to livestock. If access to sources of food and fuel change because of environmental damage, children may spend more time helping their families. As a result, children have less time for school or may lack the proper nutrition to help them learn.



Women in the world's poorest families tend to be responsible for collecting firewood and cooking, collecting water and for growing crops, as well as caring for their children. At the same time, 75% of the world's adults who cannot read are women. Changing environmental conditions are likely to place more burdens on women.



Children under 5 are most at risk of becoming ill from diseases such as malaria, which is passed to humans by infected mosquitoes in tropical countries. Climate change is likely to increase the spread of this disease, meaning more children will be at risk. Children are at risk of ill-health from food shortages due to environmental damage.



Poor environmental conditions can affect pregnant women in particular, as their immune systems are weakened. Environmental issues, such as air and water pollution, or malnutrition due to environmental changes can affect women's health and can lead to complications in pregnancy and childbirth.



Many diseases affecting people in developing countries can be related to poor sanitation and unsafe drinking water. 2.5 billion people do not have adequate sanitation. One of the targets of MDG 7 is to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.



Environmental problems, like climate change, don't recognise national boundaries and solving them requires cooperation between international organisations, governments, development organisations, private companies and communities. Achieving environmental sustainability requires partnerships across, and within countries, so that people in poverty can become involved in making decisions about solutions to the problems which affect them.

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**ADDITIONAL NOTES (IF REQUIRED): Explaining the environmental issues that most affect the world's poorest people**

**1. Loss of species (plants and animals)**

Humans depend on the millions of plants and animals we share the planet with for our survival. Along with humans, these animals, plants and the earth itself, form a complex system, called an ecosystem, which provides our basic human needs for clean air and water, nutritious food and adequate shelter. These resources are also called ecosystem services. The ecosystem also provides many hidden benefits to people such as crop pollination, pest control, soil creation and regulation of our climate. But this complex system is under threat. Scientists think that up to half of all plant and animal species that exist today could be extinct by 2100. This loss threatens ecosystems and the ecosystem services that the human race depends on for its own survival.

People living in poverty are often directly dependent on the goods and services available to them from their environment (e.g. livestock or fish for food or generating income). If these goods and services become damaged in some way (e.g. if water pollution leads to fish kills, or over fishing disrupts fish reproduction), poor people generally don't have a substitute food or another means of income. This makes people living in poverty more vulnerable to environmental damage.

**2. Climate change**

For the last 12,000 years our climate has been relatively stable. But due to the build up of greenhouse gases (e.g. carbon dioxide and methane) in our atmosphere, as a result of increased human activity, many scientists now believe that our climate is now changing. It is predicted that billions of people, particularly in developing countries, face shortages in water and food and greater risks to health and life as a result of climate change. Changing environmental conditions due to climate change are likely to increase extreme weather events, which already affect the world's poorest most. Even relatively small increases in global temperature (1-2.5 C) could result in reduced crop yields in tropical areas, leading to increased risk of hunger. Diseases such as malaria may spread because of changing climate. By 2020 up to 250 million people in Africa could be at greater risk of unsafe water, due to climate change.

**3. The Water Crisis**

Currently around 2.5 billion people do not have access to improved (adequate) sanitation, and some 1.2 billion people do not have access to a safe source of drinking water. By 2025, this number is expected to increase, due to a combination of factors, including water pollution, climate change and water depletion in the context of rises in population. Other factors such as armed conflicts, poor water management and land use changes also cause problems with water supplies.