

Billions gain access to clean water

by [Weston Williams](#) in the [October 1, 2014](#) issue

([The Christian Science Monitor](#)) Over the past couple of decades, easier access to clean water has become a reality for a huge portion of the world's population.

According to a publication released by the World Health Organization, an arm of the United Nations that monitors the health and well-being of people around the world, more than 2 billion people have gained access to an improved source of drinking water since 1990.

An "improved" water source is a water source that is likely not to be susceptible to outside contamination, especially by human waste, according to the UN's WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme.

In addition to improved water sources, about 4 billion people have achieved the gold standard in clean water access: clean water piped directly into their homes. That's well over half the world's population.

This extraordinary step toward providing universal access to clean water has been the result of a massive global effort on behalf of governments, philanthropists, and nongovernmental organizations.

[Christian organizations have been part of those efforts. For example, Lutheran World Relief [has worked on improving access to clean water](#) through investing in agricultural irrigation, water treatment technologies, sanitation facilities, and watershed protection. For potable water, LWR uses "gravity-flow systems that bring water to household taps; construction of sub-surface dams to increase water tables near bore holes," and other methods, according to its website.

The Episcopal Relief and Development Clean Water program has also [partnered with local organizations](#) to build wells, piping systems, water stations, rainwater catchment tanks, and other projects, its website states.]

Bruce Gordon, acting coordinator of water, sanitation, hygiene, and health for the WHO, said that the increase in improved water sources has been largely due to

accountability. He noted that “countries understand that progress is monitored and the results are available for all to see.” He adds that one of the most important parts of moving forward has been the acknowledgment of a fundamental human right to clean water by most of the world’s countries.

One of the most important steps toward fulfilling that right came in 1990, when the UN instituted its Millennium Development Goals, a collection of objectives to be met over a 25-year period. One of the goals the UN hoped to achieve was 88 percent improved drinking water coverage by 2015. This objective was met far ahead of schedule, in 2010, and has been steadily exceeded since then.

Much remains to be done. Even if a water source is free of contaminants, there’s still a high risk of contamination—especially from human excrement—after the water has been collected. While most of the world now has access to an improved water source, improved sanitation facilities are still needed in case collected water later becomes contaminated. The MDG target of 75 percent improved sanitation facilities—or actually separating contaminants from drinking water—will likely not be met by the deadline next year. That leaves 2.4 billion people still completely without access to such a facility by 2015.

While governments are largely supportive of efforts to improve sanitation and water availability, many of them rely on NGOs such as Water.org to coordinate and help provide funding for water sanitation and access, especially in poorer countries.

Rosemary Gudelj, senior manager for the Office of the CEO and Public Affairs for Water.org, says that most of the obstacles NGOs face in developing countries are matters of distribution.

“The system remains inefficient, and largely misses the goal of providing relief for those at the base of the economic pyramid in their daily need to secure water,” she said.

In short, despite significant progress, clean water isn’t getting to everyone: 70 percent of people without access to an improved sanitation facility live in rural areas.

“Governments and service providers have focused on extending access where they can make rapid and cost-effective gains,” Gordon said. “In some countries, this has resulted in richer people gaining services at a dramatically faster rate than poor

people, increasing inequality.”

Gordon added that maintaining the infrastructure already in place is difficult to sustain in poorer countries without outside assistance.

There are ways to help, largely through NGOs. Mary Renwick, director and senior program officer for Winrock International’s water innovation program, recommends supporting NGOs with a focus “on the rational and sustainable use of water,” including water for bathing and toilets.

“Investing in water and sanitation yields tremendous health and economic benefits,” says Gordon. “Every dollar invested in sanitation yields more than \$5 in benefits, by keeping people healthy and productive, and keeping children in school.”

*This article was edited September 15, 2014.*