World Water Day 2011 – focusing on the urban poor

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For those who live in the more developed cities of the world, water is something that comes out of a tap and goes down the toilet.

The urban sprawl of cities and towns across the globe is a constant draw to thousands of people with the potential of a better economic future. In many cities, this rapid population expansion has drastically overtaken the ability of national authorities to keep up with increasing needs, particularly in terms of provision of clean water and sanitation, and these challenges are only set to increase. Economic migrants, often poor, find themselves living on the edge – both physically and economically.

Lives and livelihoods washed away by floodwater

In the Philippines, the city of Antipoloa – with over 630,000 inhabitants and near the capital of Manila – was hard hit by Typhoon Ketsana in 2009. Maribel Marabillas, age 32 and a mother of seven, recalled what she saw that day, "I couldn't believe it. In minutes, all our belongings were floating in floodwater, and then they were gone – just like that."

Hundreds lost their lives to the typhoon and subsequent flooding, and hundreds more were injured. Maribel's home, which stood at a floodway in Cainta, Rizal, was among the thousands destroyed.

Following Ketsana, shattered communities across affected regions had to begin the difficult process of rebuilding their homes and lives. Maribel and her family are among the 400 that have relocated to a settlement being developed by the Philippine Red Cross. Besides providing shelters, each fitted with a toilet, the Red Cross constructed 17 communal water points.
"I am very happy that our new home is close to water sources," says Maribel. "Looking at this [new home and neighbourhood], really, the Red Cross rescued us from an ocean of hopelessness. We had dim hope for the future," she added.

Building a brighter future

The Red Cross response to water and sanitation issues isn't limited to this settlement. It has also provided 21 water points and 165 water taps for 30 schools, as well as 21 community water points that are linked to shelter projects in other areas. Continued education on hygiene and the importance of effective sanitation to avoid diseases such as cholera also forms part of the Philippine Red Cross long-term programme.

However, while development indicators for the Philippines show improved access to water services,

rapid population increase, urbanization and industrialization are factors that are reducing groundwater quality.

Access to water and sanitation is a human right

The theme for World Water Day 2011 is 'Water for cities: responding to the urban challenge'. Although traditionally, much of the Red Cross Red Crescent's focus tends to be on rural communities, the successes in the Philippines have shown that simple solutions can make huge difference to the lives of those also living in urban areas.

Advocacy messages are directed at local and national authorities – everyone should have access to clean water, regardless of their who they are and where they live. National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, with the support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), have a key role in ensuring that sustainable solutions are found.

So what is the future for communities living in our growing cities?

One thing is clear, the water and sanitation situation is rapidly reaching breaking point, and in some cities, particularly in slum communities, it is already at crisis level. This is a problem that can no longer be ignored. With 4,000 children under five dying each and every day from water-borne diseases worldwide, responding to the water and sanitation needs of urban communities is not just a development need, but a humanitarian emergency. And every moment of inaction results in hundreds of lives being lost.

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