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COMMENT



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A water wake-up call

WHAT are your New Year's resolutions? Have you thought of ways that you can use to conserve water?

By taking the pledge to save water, you agree that water is a precious resource and that we must work together to protect our water supplies.

As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to ravage the globe, a frequent prevention message heard everywhere is "wash your hands with soap". Proper hand washing is the standard advice to prevent the transmission of diseases, including the novel coronavirus. However, what happens when there is no access to a reliable water supply?

For many people across the world, the past year has been a difficult one, with the global pandemic causing tragedy and despair. Fighting Covid-19 has, however, also taught us lessons that we should now use to turn 2021 into a year of resilience and opportunities.

A year ago, few people could foresee the dramatic impact Covid-19 would have.

The pandemic has exposed both the deep inequalities of the world and how interconnected we all are, regardless of where we live. This crisis has clearly demonstrated how fragile the global system is and how many areas need to be changed.

Now is the time to start. There are important lessons to be learned from the past pandemic-dominated year and in 2021 there will be opportunities to right what has been wrong.

In that spirit, resilience must be a top priority. Covid-19 will be followed by many new risks linked to global warming and increasingly fragile ecosystems. To be prepared, everyone must make resilience his or her top priority. Since most effects of climate change are felt through too much or too little of water, it is essential to incorporate water into all planning and decision-making.

The past year has shown us that we need to rethink the way we do almost everything, from city and landscape planning to agriculture and industrial production. In many fields there are alternatives, like nature-based solutions, that are more water-efficient, inclusive, and resilient, if only we commit to making the transition.

Hence, we choose the world we want to live in. Covid-19 has shown us that we are unnecessarily exposed to many risks just because resources are wasted or distributed unfairly. Water is one of the best examples, with more than 80% of the world's wastewater released untreated into nature and more than half the global population living without access to improved sanitation.

This is posing dangerous risks for both people and nature that we cannot afford to take, especially not when there are new wastewater technologies available, that allow us not only to reuse water but also recover nutrients and generate energy.

The pandemic has trained a spotlight on water, sanitation and hygiene, and responses to the pandemic have often included investments in water and sanitation infrastructure, services and behaviour campaigns.

These gains must persist in a post-Covid world, to prevent further shocks caused by future epidemics, such as climate change.

We must use 2021 to strengthen water and sanitation services to realise the multiple co-benefits of economy, environment and public health, not just to combat this pandemic, but to prevent one in the future.

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