NEW YORK/GENEVA, 6 March 2012 – The world has met the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, well in advance of the MDG 2015 deadline, according to a report issued today by UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO). Between 1990 and 2010, over two billion people gained access to **improved drinking water sources**, such as **piped supplies** and **protected wells**.

Improved drinking water sources are those that are designed to be protected from outside contamination, particularly faecal matter.

United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said, “Today we recognize a great achievement for the people of the world. This is one of the first MDG targets to be met. The successful efforts to provide greater access to drinking water are a testament to all who see the MDGs not as a dream, but as a vital tool for improving the lives of millions of the poorest people.”

The report, *Progress on Drinking Water and Sanitation 2012,* by the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation, says at the end of 2010 89 per cent of the world’s population, or 6.1 billion people, used improved drinking water sources. This is one per cent more than the 88 per cent MDG target.

The report estimates that by 2015 92 per cent of the global population will have access to improved drinking water.

“For children this is especially good news,” said UNICEF Executive Director Anthony Lake. “Every day more than 3,000 children die from diarrhoeal diseases. Achieving this target will go a long way to saving children’s lives.”

Lake warned that victory could not yet be declared as at least 11 per cent of the world's population – 783 million people – are still without access to safe drinking water, and billions without sanitation facilities.

"The numbers are still staggering," he said. "But the progress announced today is proof that MDG targets can be met with the will, the effort and the funds."

The report highlights, however, that the world is still far from meeting the part of the MDG target for sanitation, and is unlikely to do so by 2015. Only 63 per cent of the world now have improved sanitation access, a figure projected to increase only to 67 per cent by 2015, well below the 75 per cent aim in the MDGs. Currently 2.5 billion people still lack improved sanitation.

UNICEF and WHO also cautioned that since the measurement of water quality is not possible globally, progress towards the MDG target of safe drinking water is measured through gathering data on the use of improved drinking water sources. Significant work must be done to ensure that improved sources of water are and remain safe.

"Providing sustainable access to improved drinking water sources is one of the most important things we can do to reduce disease," said WHO Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan. "But this achievement today is only the beginning. We must continue to ensure this access remains safe. Otherwise our gains will be in vain."

The report highlights the immense challenges that remain. Global figures mask massive disparities between regions and countries, and within countries.

Only 61 per cent of the people in sub-Saharan Africa have access to improved water supply sources compared with 90 per cent or more in Latin America and the Caribbean, Northern Africa, and large parts of Asia. Over 40 per cent of all people globally who lack access to drinking water live in sub-Saharan Africa.

The report confirms that in cases where water supplies are not readily accessible, the burden of carrying water falls disproportionately on women and girls. In many countries, the wealthiest people have seen the greatest improvement in water and sanitation access, while the poorest still lag far behind.

The report provides the latest update on rural areas across the globe, highlighting the need for greater attention both to water and sanitation. In rural areas in least developed countries, 97 out of every 100 people do not have piped water and 14 per cent of the population drinks surface water—for example, from rivers, ponds, or lakes.

Of 1.1 billion people who still practice open defecation, the vast majority (949 million) live in rural areas. This affects even regions with high levels of improved water access. For instance, 17 per cent of rural dwellers in Latin America and the Caribbean and 9 per cent in Northern Africa still resort to open defecation. Even the so-called BRIC countries, with rapidly growing economies, have large numbers of people who practice open defecation: 626 million in India, 14 million in China, and 7.2 million in Brazil.

“We have reached an important target, but we cannot stop here,” the UN Secretary-General said. “Our next step must be to target the most difficult to reach, the poorest and the most disadvantaged people across the world. The United Nations General Assembly has recognized drinking water and sanitation as human rights. That means we must ensure that *every* person has access.”

About the JMP

The WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water Supply and Sanitation (JMP) monitors progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) target to halve, by 2015, the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. The JMP publishes a report every two years which presents an update on the progress made towards reaching the MDG target for drinking water and sanitation using proxy indicators for use of improved drinking-water sources and the use of improved sanitation facilities.

About WHO

The World Health Organization is the directing and coordinating authority for health within the United Nations system. It is responsible for providing leadership on global health matters, shaping the health research agenda, setting norms and standards, articulating evidence-based policy options, providing technical support to countries and monitoring and assessing health trends. From its inception, WHO has recognized the importance of water and sanitation.

About UNICEF

UNICEF works in 190 countries and territories to help children survive and thrive, from early childhood through adolescence. The world's largest provider of vaccines for developing countries, UNICEF supports child health and nutrition, good water and sanitation, quality basic education for all boys and girls, and the protection of children from violence, exploitation, and AIDS. UNICEF is funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of individuals, businesses, foundations and governments.