



Senate State & Foreign Operations Appropriations Subcommittee

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Dear Chairs and Subcommittee Members,

When all the world's religions share just one symbol, it must be pretty important. It blesses and purifies and is the source of all life. That symbol is water. Maybe folks don't seem to be agreeing on a whole lot these days, but we can all agree that every child deserves a clean, safe glass of water.

Here is where I'm supposed to remind you that 663 million people who don't have access to safe water and 2.4 billion lack the basic dignity and safety of a toilet. That's one third of the world's population. And I could tell you that this causes fifty different diseases and illnesses and fifty percent of undernutrition in children, making it the #1 killer of children under age five. It kills more children than malaria, AIDS and TB; more than the horrific humanitarian crisis in Syria; more than Ebola and Zika.

But forget the numbers. A friend of mine volunteered at a small health clinic in Honduras. She befriended a 9-year-old boy named Cristian who loved playing soccer. He

was at the clinic with an eye infection caused by a Neglected Tropical Disease, an NTD, spread through unsafe water. But his news was good. It was easily treatable. But when my friend returned to the health clinic a year later, she found Christian there, a morose little boy with a tumor that covered his left eye and part of his face. When Cristian was just 11-years-old, he died. He died of complications from a completely treatable infection because his family did not have access to safe water.

I recently read about a little boy named Allaman Sidiqui, born in Mali to a mother who has a one in 17 chance of losing her child to sepsis, an infection easily prevented with soap and water. But simple infections like sepsis kill 430,000 newborns every year, and one of those was Allaman, on the 15th day of his brief life.

All these two little boys needed was just some soap and clean water. Each of us was diminished when these two unique, unrepeatable gifts of human life were wasted. What divine is honored with a religious symbol that disfigures, stunts and kills thousands of children each day?

Here's what I really want to say:

Water is the world's silent pandemic.

- After the Ebola outbreak, the World Health Organization looked at health care facilities in 54 countries. Almost 40% of health care facilities did not have access to safe water; almost 20% did not have even basic sanitation; and 35% did not have soap and water.
- We spend billions getting life-saving drugs to HIV/AIDS patients, which they must take with contaminated water that makes their already immuno-suppressed bodies sick – and—unable to absorb the medications and nutrition.
- Food security is impossible without water security.
- Maternal/child health is of primary concern. Is current legislation aimed at protecting mother and child prioritizing access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education? Soap is among the most cost-effective ways to prevent illness. But one must have it and know to use it.
- NTDs impact the poorest one billion adults and 500 million children on the planet. Is current legislation to address NTDs prioritizing access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene education so we're not just curing NTDS but preventing them altogether?

In a world that desperately needs religion and government to be forces for good, water provides an ideal place to unite. Water is a rare opportunity for a solvable problem to become the keystone to healing so much. The causes of poverty are intricate and complicated. What's remarkably simple is the immediate impact and multiplier effect of water.

Provide a woman with safe water and a toilet, and educate her on basic hygiene, and we set in motion a cycle where maternal and child health become the priority. Women and

girls are no longer beasts of burden hauling water for hours every day, even though that water makes their families sick. Girls get to go and stay in school; illness and death are replaced by education, greater productivity, and new economic opportunities that benefit all of us in this global economy.

Americans in your district -- right now -- are supporting global WASH [water/sanitation/hygiene] development through their houses of worship, universities, and NGOs. But long-term success is impossible without the funding, leadership and influence of the U.S. government. Please fund a minimum of \$425 million for the Water for the Poor Act, as amended by the Water for the World Act. Within that total, please assure that no less than \$155 million is prioritized for Sub-Saharan Africa.

Religious water is never passive. Nor can we be. We have got to turn this religious symbol from the burden that it is, into the source of life it is meant to be. Together, we know we can make water the source of health and life for all.

With gratitude,

Susan Barnett, Founder, *Faiths for Safe Water*

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