

water advocates

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Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton
United States Department of State, Washington, D.C.

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Dear Madame Secretary,

We would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Secretary of State. As women who, like you, are committed to the empowerment of women around the world, we were encouraged to hear President Obama speak on an issue that concerns us: “To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow.” We believe it is imperative that the U.S. Department of State and USAID acknowledge the severity of the drinking water and sanitation crisis in the developing world and its impact on women and their families. We urge you to make action on this crisis a priority in U.S. foreign policy.

As you are aware, the global lack of water and sanitation is an urgent - but solvable - development challenge. Nearly one billion people do not have access to safe drinking water and 2.5 billion people do not have a safe place to dispose their excreta or a place to wash their hands. Women and children bear the most severe burden from this crisis.

If safe drinking water were more accessible, women would not waste 40 billion hours annually fetching water from distant and contaminated sources. They would have more time to spend on income-generating activities, education and caring for their families. Furthermore, it would ease women’s burden of taking care of their sick family members. Only with safe water will women and their families have a chance to live without debilitating water-borne diseases (such as cholera, typhoid and amoebic dysentery), and to lead productive lives.

Sanitation further improves the lives of women and children. Latrines enhance girls’ attendance at school (especially once at the age of menstruation), provide dignity to the one billion women who otherwise defecate in the open and reduce direct exposure to disease-causing pathogens. Furthermore, hand washing facilities and hygiene education help prevent diarrheal diseases that kill 4,500 children every day.

The value of water and sanitation is far-reaching, extending to such development objectives as environmental sustainability and gender equality. The UN Millennium Development Goals hinge on water and sanitation, on average thirty percent, for their sustainability.

The solutions are known and proven. You’ve seen first-hand abroad, most recently on your trip to Indonesia, the importance of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene and the ways that USAID can respond to the problem. With increasing appropriations from Congress through the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, the U.S. Department of State and USAID can continue and expand their work in the water and sanitation field. Still, much work needs to be done before women’s and children’s lives are improved significantly.

We ask you to take a leadership role in significantly advancing the lives of women and their families worldwide by taking the following steps:

Water Advocates is a US-based nonprofit organization dedicated to increasing American support for worldwide access to safe, affordable, and sustainable drinking water and adequate sanitation.

Appoint high-level advocates for water: Appoint high-level officials at the U.S. Department of State to provide leadership on global water issues and to USAID to implement the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act of 2005. The need for such institutional strengthening is documented by the Center for Strategic and International Studies' recent extensive report, "Global Water Futures: A Roadmap for Future U.S. Policy".

Commit U.S. leadership on the world stage: As World Water Day 2009 (March 22) approaches, announce a new U.S. commitment to address the need for safe, affordable and sustainable drinking water and sanitation, while bolstering the U.S. presence at the World Water Forum in Istanbul in March, G8 meetings and at similar fora.

Significantly increase funding: Increase resources to implement the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act in the FY2010 Budget, as part of an overall increase of foreign development assistance, as called for by InterAction, the "Transition to Green" Report, and a broad spectrum of U.S. nonprofit organizations, corporations and religious organizations

Complete the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act Strategy: As called for by the Senator Paul Simon Water for the Poor Act, complete and endorse a comprehensive Strategy to implement the Act's objectives built on common indicators, benchmarks, timetables and future resources needed.

Hire qualified field staff: As part of the current increase in foreign service officers, ensure that a significant proportion have a background in drinking water supply, sanitation or hygiene promotion.

These steps provide an opportunity for you to help alleviate the drinking water and sanitation burden on women and their families. We hope that you will act decisively on this crucial issue as Secretary of State to make this a priority of U.S. foreign policy.

Thank you for your time and support for women around the world.

Sincerely,

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