

More people have mobile phones than toilets.

Of the world's seven billion people, six billion have mobile phones. Yet only 4.5 billion have access to toilets or latrines – meaning that 2.5 billion people, mostly in rural areas, do not have proper sanitation. Unbelievably, 1.1 billion people still defecate in the open. Some 20 countries, mostly in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, account for over 80 per cent of open defecation in the world.

Ending open defecation is key to fighting poverty and achieving the MDGs one community at a time.

The call to action aims to focus on improving hygiene, changing social norms, better managing human waste and waste-water, and, by 2025, completely eliminating the practice of open defecation, which perpetuates the vicious cycle of disease and entrenched poverty. The countries where open defecation is most widely practiced are the same countries with the highest numbers of under-five child deaths, high levels of under-nutrition and poverty, and large wealth disparities. There are strong gender impacts, as having to go outside their homes to relieve themselves makes women and girls vulnerable to violence, and lack of safe, private toilets at schools is a major impediment to girls' education.

The Deputy Secretary-General's initiative builds on the strong commitment already made by Member States to take action through the Sanitation Drive to 2015 endorsed by the UN General Assembly in 2010, as well as the Sanitation and Water For All initiative coordinated by the World Bank, UNICEF and other partners. His effort – which is not a new programme in itself and will not set up any new structures or funding mechanisms – will focus on generating action at the community level, one community at a time. It aims to engage community leaders, schools, local institutions and citizens, with support from governments and international organizations. Solutions exist and affordable, safe, effective and sustainable approaches and technologies are available – they just need to be prioritized and scaled up.

Mr. Eliasson has long been committed to water and sanitation issues. Together with partners from the UN System, Governments and civil society, he is launching the call to action at UN Headquarters on 21 March on the eve of World Water Day.