

Water: A thirsty planet

There is more than enough fresh water on earth to satisfy human needs. But it is capriciously distributed. While the Sahel goes thirsty, torrential rains and seasonal flooding drown parts of south-east Asia.

Most fresh water is used in irrigation, a necessary but wasteful activity. Industry uses less water but it pollutes more. Our biological need for water is modest—a litre or two a day will keep us alive—but our civilized thirst is boundless. When we flush a toilet we're using 10 litres of water. Taking a shower consumes 100 litres.

Not everybody is that lucky. At least 1.7 billion people do not have an adequate supply of drinking water and some 3 billion lack proper sanitation. About 24,000 people die every day in the third world because of this.

The UN system has been concerned with water resources since 1950, when UNESCO started an arid zone research programme. In 1964, UNESCO launched the International Hydrological Decade, an effort which dramatically widened knowledge about water.

Alarmed at the Sahel drought, the UN held a major international conference on water in Mar del Plata, Argentina, in 1977. Governments were asked to formulate and apply comprehensive national water policies, with UN help. Today, most UN agencies are involved in this effort.

In 1984, for example, FAO helped Honduras produce a detailed code for agricultural use of water. More than 100 FAO water-for-agriculture projects are now under way at a cost of some \$50 million.

WHO oversees work on the In-



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ternational Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade launched in 1981. New methods of testing drinking water quality have been developed in rural Indonesia, Peru and Zambia with UNEP's help.

UNEP has helped develop an ac-

tion plan for the environmental management of the Zambesi River Basin which will benefit more than 20 million people in eight African countries. Negotiations for a similar plan for Lake Chad have already begun. Lake Victoria will be next.