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RURAL WATER SUPPLY

The islands of the South Pacific region vary greatly in their size and geological characteristics, from rugged mountainous regions to small sandy atolls. There is also a wide variation in annual rainfall. Of the total population it is estimated that about 4.5 million live on the larger high islands and about 400,000 on atolls and isolated low islands. Of the first group about 800,000 live in the larger urban centres which are provided with reasonably adequate piped water supplies and sanitary facilities.

Since in the Pacific Islands the majority of the population live in the rural areas, community water supply and sanitation are very much a part of rural life and development.

Most people living in rural areas rely on wells, springs, streams or rivers for their water supply. This water comes from rain that has fallen on the land and forest in a water catchment area. If the forest or bush in the catchment is cleaned, the rain runs off too fast, and there is less water in the dry periods. In the atolls and low islands where the fresh water is scarce, rain water collection and groundwater provide the only water resources.

There can be no doubt that the key to improved sanitary conditions is the provision of a piped water supply. More benefits can be gained from money spent on a water supply programme than in any other way. Since piped water generates a greater volume of waste water, adequate facilities must be provided to safely remove this waste water. If this is not done health hazards can arise from the breeding of mosquitos and flies and cause disease to spread.

Wells should be lined or covered to keep them clean. Water storage tanks should be screened to keep out dirt and mosquitos. If there has not been any rain for some time, rainwater from roofs can be polluted, and a simple bypass could prevent the first run-off from going into the tank. Water intakes on rivers and streams should be protected, and the land use in the catchment area should be restricted to prevent pollution. The uncontrolled use of herbicides, pesticides and fertilizers can also cause pollution of water resources.

Better quality and safer water results in less sickness, especially among young children and helps people to work more effectively and to become more productive.

Improved rural water supply is one of the many problems being considered by the South Pacific Regional Environment Programme (SPREP).

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