High cost of being poor shows clearly in the price of water

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Every second of every day, the urban population increases by two people, mainly in the cities of the developing world.

Of every 10 people moving to a city in the developing world, eight will live in an informal settlement where land rights are insecure, urban planning is practically nonexistent and basic services such as water and sanitation are difficult and expensive to obtain.

For those of us concerned with the global water challenge, the obvious question to ask is how well urban areas are coping with the need to provide safe drinking water and basic sanitation.

One disturbing trend is the rapidly growing reliance on bottled water in urban areas. This is understandable, since piped supplies are often unreliable. Sometimes public taps or residential systems supply water for only two or three hours a day. And there are people who remain unconvinced that piped water will not make them sick.

But bottled water is staggeringly expensive. In terms of price per cubic metre, people living in developing countries pay for bottled water up to 50 times what people in developed countries pay for good-quality drinking water. It is unacceptable that the poorest continue to pay far more than the richest for water, but this situation persists because the urban poor lack power, prestige and a voice in policy making.

In relation to sanitation in cities, where half of the world's population live, a comparable situation exists. Everyone deserves a safe, clean, dignified place to defecate. However, in developing countries, only one in four urban dwellers has access to adequate sanitation facilities. Millions have no toilet at all and have to defecate in the open.

This is the case in urban slums in particular. In these densely populated areas, which sprawl without any form of planning, there are neither plumbing systems nor sewage infrastructure. In some cases, slum dwellers use shared latrines, usually not connected to the sewers. Emptying them is both difficult and dangerous.

Poor drainage in slums creates appalling living conditions, especially during floods - an increasingly frequent occurrence. In slum areas, a minor flood is not just inconvenient. It is life-threatening. With open drains and overflowing latrines, even a small flood means that children have to wade through raw sewage.

It is hardly surprising, then, that all over the world cholera outbreaks are becoming more frequent - most recently in Haiti, but also in Africa and elsewhere. With climate change bringing less-predictable rain patterns and more flooding, cholera is likely to be an even bigger threat.

And yet, despite these serious challenges, the comprehensive data collected by the United Nations shows that on the whole cities are doing fairly well. In fact, urban dwellers in the developing world enjoy relatively higher water and sanitation coverage than their rural counterparts. And most cities have kept overall coverage rates stable in the face of massive population growth.

Although this is an encouraging trend, we have no reason for complacency. In 2015, the world will assess progress towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals that were established in 2000.

We lag far behind our target of halving the number of people lacking basic sanitation. Cities are where we must see progress - and it is our hope that a global commitment to "sustainable sanitation: the five-year drive to 2015" will help build the political will to tackle this crisis.

Cities continue to offer the hope of a better life, and they also offer the hope of a greener future. When people live close together they take up less land and use less energy for heating, cooling and transportation. Increased human interaction also drives creativity and innovation.

In the case of water and sanitation, cities offer many opportunities for green growth. Think of this: only 16% of Africans enjoy on-premises piped water. This presents a real opportunity for economic growth.

By extending water and sanitation services to the most needy, public and private entities stand to benefit from expanded tax bases and returns on investment. And, most importantly, millions of Africans would enjoy a measurable increase in their standard of living.

Ensuring that the cities of tomorrow deliver the promise of a better life starts with the provision of basic services such as water, sanitation, energy and education. Our future depends on it.

•*The Prince of Orange is chairman of the United Nations secretary-general's advisory board on water and sanitation*