

## A CLOSER LOOK: **WATER & POVERTY**

BY PAUL DARILEK

**THE POOREST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD ACTUALLY PAY SOME OF THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PRICES FOR DRINKING WATER, AND THE WATER THEY GET IS LESS CLEAN AND LESS PLENTIFUL. THE POOR PAY MORE IN THE FORM OF LOST TIME, HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND LIFE, BUT ALSO IN MONETARY TERMS. MORE THAN ANY OTHER FACTOR, WATER SCARCITY KEEPS THE "BOTTOM BILLION" ENTRAPPED IN A CYCLE OF EXTREME POVERTY. IN THE END ALL OF HUMANITY PAYS THE PRICE. THE GOOD NEWS IS THAT IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY.**

### **THE POOR PAY MORE?**

People living in the slums of Nairobi, Jakarta, and Manila actually pay 5 to 10 times more for water than those in high income areas of those same cities. They even pay more than consumers in London or New York. The poorest 20 percent of households in El Salvador and Nicaragua spend on average more than 10 percent of their household income on water.<sup>1</sup> In the U.S. the median household spends only 1.1 percent of its income on water and sewage.<sup>2</sup> For the poorest of the poor, the water bill may be the world's most retrogressive tax—on life itself.

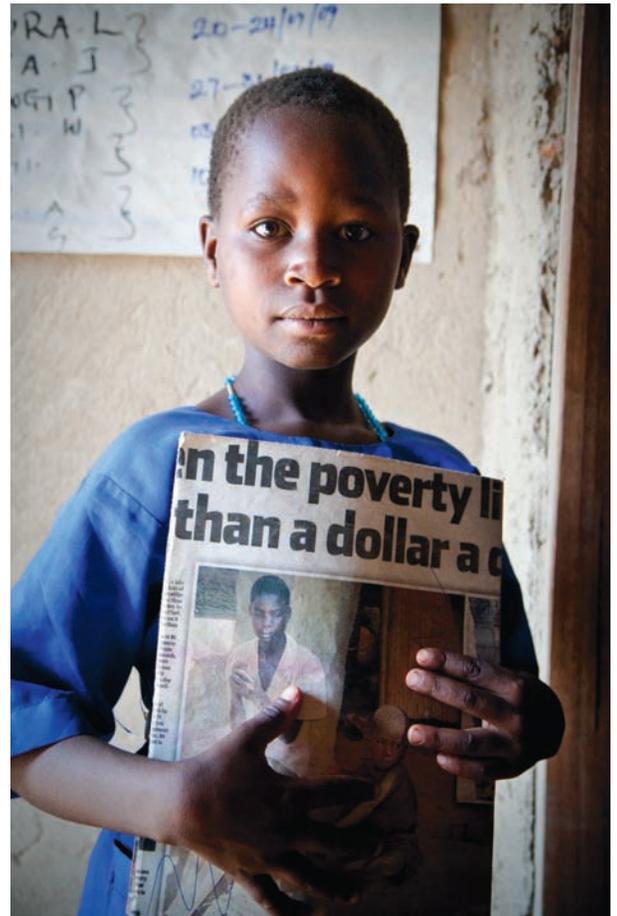
### **DEAD BABIES COST MONEY**

Infant mortality is highest where clean water access is lowest. Every year 1.8 million children die from diarrhea, far more than armed conflict and terrorism combined.<sup>3</sup> Picture a pre-school classroom blowing up every six minutes, day and night. The irony is that high infant mortality *increases* population. Demographers call it the "demographic-economic paradox." Elderly people in extreme poverty depend on their children for sustenance in old age. When people know some of their offspring will die, others will move away, and some will not be able help, they tend to have more children. So it is that India's former minister of population, Karan Singh, coined the phrase, "development is the best contraceptive."<sup>4</sup> Studies show that access to safe water reduces child death rates by more than 20 percent in Uganda. In Peru a toilet in the home reduces infant death by more than 30 percent.<sup>5</sup> The world over, the people with lowest reproduction rates are those who know their babies are not going to die.

### **WOMEN AND CHILDREN FIRST!**

In Sub-Saharan Africa alone, 40 billion hours a year are spent mostly by women—just hauling water. That's equivalent to a year's labor for the entire workforce of France. The result, known as "time-poverty," affects women and girls most. About half the girls in Sub-Saharan Africa who drop out of primary school do so because of poor water and sanitation. At any given time close to half of the people in the developing world are suffering from one or more of the diseases associated with inadequate water and sanitation.<sup>6</sup> Each year, 443 million school days are lost from water-related illness—equivalent to an entire school year for all seven-year-old children in Ethiopia.<sup>7</sup> Lack of education keeps children from getting out of poverty. Lack of water deprives children from education.

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**443 MILLION  
SCHOOL DAYS  
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ILLNESS**

# EVERY



# \$8

## INVESTED IN WATER AND SANITATION

## WORTH OF TIME, PRODUCTIVITY, AND HEALTH



### 8:1 ROI

The payoff for water provision is big. Every \$1 invested in water and sanitation generates on average an \$8 return in the form of saved time, increased productivity, and reduced health costs.<sup>8</sup> This does not even include new productivity made possible by water access. The long-term benefits of access to clean water would be felt by all of us in the form of decreases in economic aid, increased productivity, lower infant mortality, decreased population burden, increased educational opportunity, and decreased “time poverty”—not to mention the ethical payoff of giving life to those who most need it.

### WHY DIDN'T I KNOW THIS?

You're not alone if you had never fully contemplated how lack of water keeps people in poverty. The world is only beginning to take a close look at the root causes of extreme poverty. Almost two in three people lacking access to clean water survive on less than \$2 a day. One in three lives on less than \$1 a day.<sup>9</sup> Their world and their challenges are foreign to us. Dripping taps in rich countries lose more water than is available to the poorest billion people on earth.<sup>10</sup> It's no surprise we've never put ourselves in their shoes and fully understood how water scarcity perpetuates this cruel cycle of poverty.

### GOOD NEWS!

The good news is that there is more than enough water in the world for domestic purposes, agriculture, and industry. And the payoff for its more equitable distribution is great.

LWI's Gary Evans puts it this way, “We're in a world where there are 900 million people barely treading water, and the water's too low for them to reach the ladder. They don't need a boat. They don't need a helicopter to rescue them. They just need a little boost so they can reach the ladder. Then they can climb out on their own. Clean water provides that boost.”

And if you want to reach out and give that boost, and you want to do it in Jesus' name, then you're in the right place. 💧



1. UNDP Human Development Report 2006, *Beyond Scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*, p. 7.
2. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Water on Tap: What You Need to Know*, p. 11.
3. UNDP Human Development Report 2006, *Beyond Scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*, p. 3.
4. David N. Weil (2004). *Economic Growth*. Addison-Wesley. p. 111.
5. UNDP Human Development Report 2006, *Beyond Scarcity: Power, poverty and the global water crisis*, p. 6-7.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 47.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 22.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.