Cholera is endemic in East Africa. Yet every couple of years when it rains heavily, storm water washes accumulated human waste, mainly from informal settlements lacking minimum sanitation facilities, into open boreholes and other water sources used by the poor for drinking water. The result is a cholera epidemic.

The most recent cholera epidemic which raged in East Africa in 1997 and 1998, is still fresh in our minds. Within a span of a few months in late 1997, the epidemic, which started in some slums and squatter settlements, spread like bush fire in the region, killing thousands in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda. The three countries suffered heavily, not only from lost lives, but also from lost exports and a drop in tourism.

Diseases spread rapidly when human and household waste accumulates in a stream people use for their daily water needs as in this picture taken in Nairobi’s Mathare slum. Photo © Justo Casal/UN-HABITAT
daily to use a single public toilet. It is unbelievable but true that a slum dweller in Nairobi, forced to rely on private water vendors, pays five to seven times more for a litre of water than an average North American citizen. The health and economic impacts of these service deficiencies can be very costly to a country in the long run.

Secondly, there is a widening gap between the growing demand and the current provisioning of water and sanitation services. The Millennium Task Force estimates the current financial gap to be around $16 billion a year, a large part of which must go to address the sanitation needs of the urban poor. A strong political commitment at national level and further strengthening of ongoing sector reforms to improve governance at local level will be crucial to enhance the flow of investment in water and sanitation. Future capacity-building efforts must also be closely linked to follow-up investment. In Johannesburg, a promising initiative came from the Asian Development Bank, which committed $500 million in loans to bring pro-poor investment to Asian Cities through the Water for Asian Cities programme of UN-HABITAT.

Africa – a rapidly urbanizing continent with the worst water and sanitation coverage among all the regions – needs special attention of the international community in its struggle to achieve the internationally agreed targets. Over the past three years, UN-HABITAT has helped African countries to improve the management of water and sanitation in their cities. With the support of a broad coalition of donors, the Water for African Cities programme has created an enabling environment for new investment in African cities. The international community showed its willingness to support this process at the G-8 Summit held in Evian in June this year. A notable announcement came from Canada which committed $15 million to UN-HABITAT’s Water and Sanitation Trust Fund for African cities.

Finally, meeting this daunting challenge calls for a broad-based partnership of all key stakeholders on the water scene: governments, the private sector and the communities themselves. Governments and city authorities must create an enabling environment for this partnership to flourish.

Community participation in the water sector will not only ensure that the community is provided with what it wants rather than what the government thinks it needs, but will also provide the community with a sense of belonging and ownership. This can go a long way towards cost recovery and long-term sustainability of services.

Public-private partnerships can bring in efficiency gains and cost-effectiveness in the water sector and effective regulatory control can ensure that poor neighbourhoods are not neglected. A strong political commitment, transparency in management and sound strategies will be needed to attract more private sector investment and risk-taking in urban services.

World Habitat Day this year will focus on Water and Sanitation for Cities. This could be a defining moment for national planners, policy-makers and city authorities to reflect on the challenge ahead and to dedicate themselves anew to a task that a statement by world leaders in Johannesburg called “humanity’s best investment to achieve development and sustainability.”

Kalyan Ray is the chief of UN-HABITAT’s Water, Sanitation and Infrastructure Branch.