

Costs a barrier to better sanitation

Richer nations 'can help raise standards in poor countries'

ABOUT 2.5 billion people still do not have access to proper toilets, according to estimates by the World Health Organisation (WHO).

Yet, it would cost only about US\$380 billion (S\$525 billion) – or less than 0.1 per cent of the total gross domestic product (GDP) of the 30-nation Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development – to make sanitation and drinking water standards up to the mark in Asia.

Richer countries and market forces can combine to help alleviate such basic problems for poorer nations, many of which cannot afford sanitation infrastructure, said Dr Seetharam Kallidaikurichi, director of the Institute of Water Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

"It costs a pittance to get this fixed," he said at the launch of the World Toilet Summit at Suntec City yesterday. The three-day forum brings together policymakers, academics and the business community to discuss sanitation issues.

Another forum speaker, Dr Anand Chiplunkar, principal water supply and sanitation specialist at the Asian Development Bank (ADB), said outdated traditions and beliefs, as well as inadequate financing and institutional



Ms Sim Sopheak of Lien Aid demonstrating a model of the new, affordable toilet at the summit yesterday. ST PHOTO: CHEW SENG KIM

capabilities, have held back development so far.

ADB estimates show that poor sanitation costs developing countries up to 7 per cent of GDP every year from losses caused by illness, for instance.

It does not take much to achieve the targets set out in the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, a blueprint that aims to meet the needs of the world's poorest by 2015: US\$7 bil-

lion to build up infrastructure in sanitation and a further US\$53 billion for waste water treatment.

Also speaking at the forum, Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Swee Say said: "This global sanitation challenge can be overcome only if the global community learns to put every dollar, every idea and every drop of water to good use."

Non-governmental organisation Lien Aid, for one, aims to make toilets more affordable to more than 500 villages in Cambodia, where only 20 per cent of rural communities have access to proper sanitation facilities.

Together with the World Toilet Organisation, it has been marketing a cheaper toilet, which sells for between

US\$30 and US\$100 each, compared with the usual price of about US\$300.

Instead of being built using costly brick and mortar, they are made from bamboo and concrete.

Said Ms Lyn McLennan, Lien Aid's programme manager: "When we look at affordability, a major barrier has been the cost. By driving this down, more people have been able to get access to such products and services."