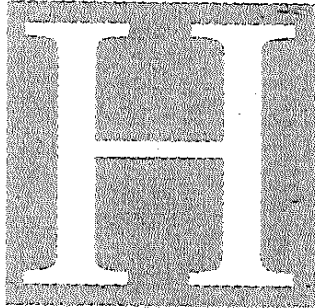


Why HK can't be flushed with pride

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ong Kong likes to portray itself as “Asia’s world city”, with sophisticated town planning and top-notch hygiene standards. But that image soon fades as we move away from urban areas. The poor infrastructure and slack supervision in some rural places means many residents are still living with facilities found in the third world.

The problem was highlighted by the Audit Commission in its regular report on public spending and compliance. Currently, more than 510,000 people are living in village houses, squatter huts and private housing that are not connected to public sewerage facilities. At least 70,000 village houses are using unlicensed septic tanks to treat waste water; another 84,000 squatter homes just discharge sewage – either untreated or filtered through interceptors – into nearby rivers or water bodies. The damage to the environment can only be imagined.

At issue is not just environmental nuisance. As discovered by the auditor, the levels of E coli at nearly 90 per cent of the city’s river monitoring stations last year exceeded water quality objectives. The contamination is presumably caused by improper sewage discharge. Given the countryside is such an attraction for locals and visitors alike, there exists serious threats to public health.

It has to be asked why substandard sewage facilities are still tolerated in an affluent city like Hong Kong. The auditor rightly hit out at the slow implementation of a village sewerage programme launched in 2001. Instead of being commissioned between 2004 and 2009 as planned, the programme only covered a quarter of the 662 villages targeted as of June this year.

The sorry state of affairs owes much to bureaucracy and inertia of the relevant authorities. Not only does it make a mockery of our claim to be Asia’s world city, it damages our precious environment and jeopardises public health. We trust the damning report should give the government a push to do a better job in cleaning up the city.

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