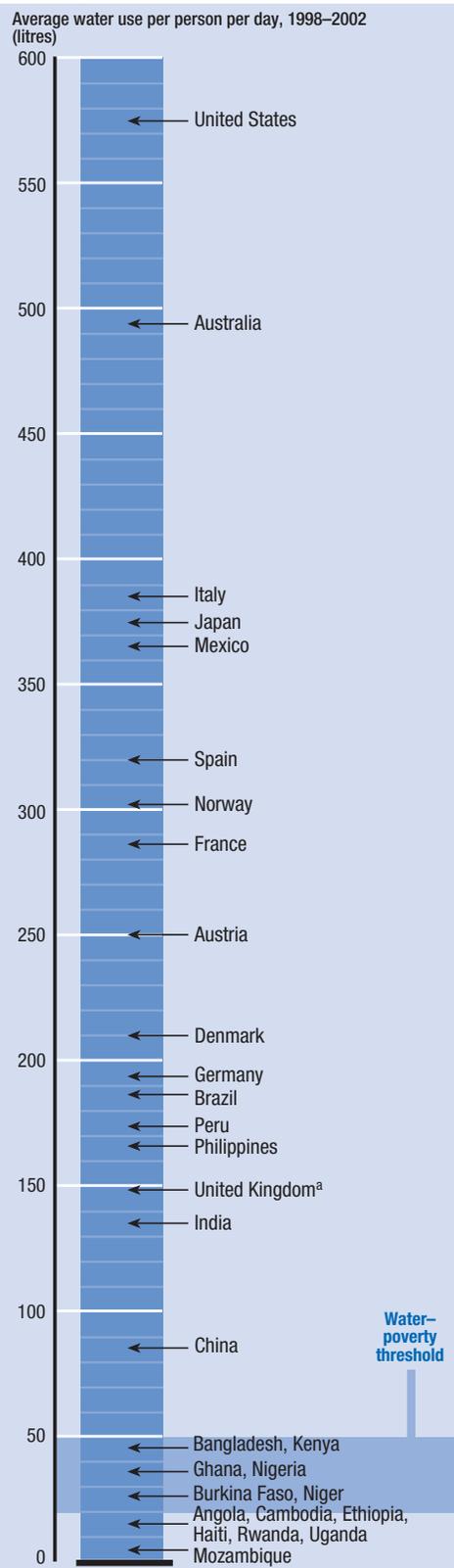


Figure 1.2 Worlds apart: the global water gap



poorest countries. In Tajikistan nearly a third of the population takes water from canals and irrigation ditches, with risks of exposure to polluted agricultural run-off.¹⁵ The problem is not that people are unaware of the dangers—it is that they have no choice. Apart from the health risks, inadequate access to water means that women and young girls spend long hours collecting and carrying household water supplies.

Simple comparisons between rich and poor countries highlight the scale of global inequality (figure 1.2). Average water use ranges from 200–300 litres a person a day in most countries in Europe to 575 in the United States. Residents of Phoenix, Arizona, a desert city with some of the greenest lawns in the United States, use more than 1,000 litres a day. By contrast, average use in countries such as Mozambique is less than 10 litres. National averages inevitably mask very large variations. People lacking access to improved water in developing countries consume far less, partly because they have to carry it over long distances and water is heavy. The 100 litre a day minimum international norm for a family of five weighs some 100 kilograms—a heavy burden to carry for two to three hours, especially for young girls. Another problem is that poor households are often unable to afford more than a small amount of water purchased in informal markets—an issue to which we return below.

What is the basic threshold for adequate water provision? Setting a water-poverty line is difficult because of variations relating to climate—people in arid northern Kenya need more drinking water than people in London or Paris—seasonality, individual household characteristics and other factors. International norms set out by agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) suggest a minimum requirement of 20 litres a day from a source within 1 kilometre of the household. This is sufficient for drinking and basic personal hygiene. Below this level people are constrained in their ability to maintain their physical well-being and the dignity that comes with being clean. Factoring in bathing and laundry needs would raise the personal threshold to about 50 litres a day.