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A toilet for everyone: we can do it

“I do wish that I will get married in a family which has the facility of a toilet and separate water tap. It is a dream for me.”

Barkha, aged 12, Sanjay Amar Colony, Delhi, India

There are 2.6 billion people in the world today for whom a toilet represents a life-changing dream, a dream of better health, higher incomes, more education, higher social status, greater societal inclusion, a cleaner living environment and, for the children in that group, a better chance of living to celebrate their fifth birthdays.

Sanitation for all requires neither colossal sums of money nor breakthrough scientific discoveries. Using existing, proven approaches and technologies, and for about US\$ 10 billion a year – less than 1 percent of global military expenditure – the world could meet the MDG sanitation goal by 2015. And around ten years later, by 2025, everyone could have a toilet to use. It’s possible. Here’s what it will take:

Hard work

Sanitation is unglamorous but vital. Promoting hygiene and changing people’s behaviour takes time and personal effort. There is no convenient substitute for hard work, no handy technical short cut. But the human race is extremely good at hard work – when people set a collective goal and work towards it with determination, they achieve it.

Plain speaking

In most cultures around the world, people do not like to talk openly about intimate bodily functions, such as defecating and menstruating. “Sanitation” is a euphemism that hides the ugly truth of open defecation. “The special needs of women and girls” is a needlessly indirect way to refer to the biological fact of menstruation. The success in galvanising global attention to HIV/AIDS teaches an important lesson: when policy-makers, civil society groups and ordinary people started speaking openly about how HIV spreads and how to stop it, rates of new infection started to decline. HIV/AIDS activists, admired celebrities, visionary government leaders, and media commentators spurred change with public protests and publicised actions. Sanitation needs such plain-speaking champions.

Political leadership

In many countries, sanitation is a political and institutional orphan, an under-funded and low-profile topic. This neglect can be overcome with some simple steps: assigning a Minister responsibility for sanitation, agreeing on a national sanitation policy and a single, country-wide sanitation plan, allocating





→ identifiable, dedicated budget lines to sanitation, and putting into place a good coordinating and monitoring system. Countries that have achieved huge progress in sanitation have taken these steps and confirm that they do not cost much money, just political energy.

Creating demand for sanitation

Generating demand is critical to change, because the people most likely to do something about poor sanitation are those who experience it themselves. Their own drive and willingness to upgrade their housing with toilets and washrooms – helped as needed by local government and civil society – is essential. However, many people who lack basic sanitation do not demand it, so agencies need to work to generate that demand. Promotional campaigns have traditionally focused on health benefits, but now agencies have learned to respond to the actual concerns of the people – typically convenience, comfort, safety or prestige – rather than health. For example, building community consensus that open defecation is a serious and shameful problem that can be solved by toilets has proved successful in a number of countries. Supporting agencies to focus on long-term behaviour changes in communities and educating children through school-based programmes are

both necessary for sustaining demand and helping new behaviours stick. These examples constitute an approach that is the opposite of the traditional supply-led, subsidy-driven approach, in which governments provided a few toilets to solve a problem that communities did not think they had.

Meeting demand for sanitation

But generating demand is only the start. That demand must be met. The 2.6 billion people without sanitation are not passive beneficiaries, but active potential customers. Meeting demand requires supporting, training and financing sanitation service providers, many of whom are small-scale operators who understand the needs of local communities. Poor families may also need loans or subsidies to build and maintain toilets, washrooms and wastewater disposal systems. These are private investments that achieve a public good. While the households themselves buy and construct on-site toilets, only the public authorities can take responsibility to manage waste disposal (septic sludge, sewage and solid waste) and safeguard water resources.

Main sources:
UN, UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, WSP/World Bank, WSSCC.

Household toilet coverage in urban and rural regions, Thailand 2005

