

Sanitation and the seven Ps — problems, promise, principles, people, politics, professionalism —and potties

by Mayling Simpson-Hebert

For too long sanitation has been ‘the step-child of water supply’, say the experts. So, over two years, an international working group diagnosed the problems, and dissected the successes. What does it propose for the future?

The problem

THERE IS A continuing gap between population growth and coverage, and the failure of sanitation programmes to be sustainable. This was one of the issues brought to the attention of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) — an informal group of sector professionals, donors and sector agencies — which first met in the Moroccan city of Rabat in September 1993.

During the International Drinking-Water Supply and Sanitation Decade, progress in sanitation was made, but it lagged behind water-supply coverage, while population growth outstripped both. I suggested that we should take a closer look at sanitation, and consider whether we were using the optimal methods to achieve better coverage. Perhaps we cannot promote sanitation as we do water, nor can we necessarily expect water to pull along sanitation.

The Working Group on Sanitation was launched with 12 members and grew, over its two-year lifespan, to 44, from countries all around the world. The group met three times and, from the start, the participants had open discussions, with a divergence of opinions, and did not just reflect ‘accepted thinking’.

The group tried to define the ‘problem.’ Sanitation suffers from a host of problems: lack of political will, the sector’s low prestige, poor policy at all levels, inadequate institutional frameworks for implementing sanitation, inappropriate approaches which focus on single solutions and ignore the diversity of needs and contexts, neglect of consumer preferences, too few good technical solutions, and the lack of a gender focus.

The promise

But not all the news is bad! There were enough examples of successful projects

to enable the working group to list the features shared by better sanitation programmes, (see box on page 13), together with some ‘guiding principles’ (see box on page 14) that should underpin future programmes.

The working group also went further, and formulated three challenges, or mandates, to the sector, to raise the status of sanitation and promote it more effectively:

- people-centred, principle-based programmes;
- increased political commitment; and
- more rigorous professionalism and science in the sector.

If these challenges are met, sanitation could be transformed from being the step-child of water supply, to a respected sector in its own right.

People

People-centred programmes recognize that people are consumers, that sanitation is a concept and a value, and that sanitation facilities are consumer products that put the concept into practice. Both the concept and the facilities may need to be marketed, to increase demand.

People’s choices and motivation are at the heart of sanitation, but many disadvantaged people may need to be empowered to express their demands and their preferences. In all cases, people’s participation in sanitation planning and design is essential, and nothing that will

discourage private providers from entering this market should be done. On the contrary, private business may be the sanitation sector’s best partner.

Building on what people already know and do about sanitation, and helping them to do it is one of the most important principles endorsed by the group. Incremental change, one step at a time, is more sustainable than the wholesale introduction of new systems.

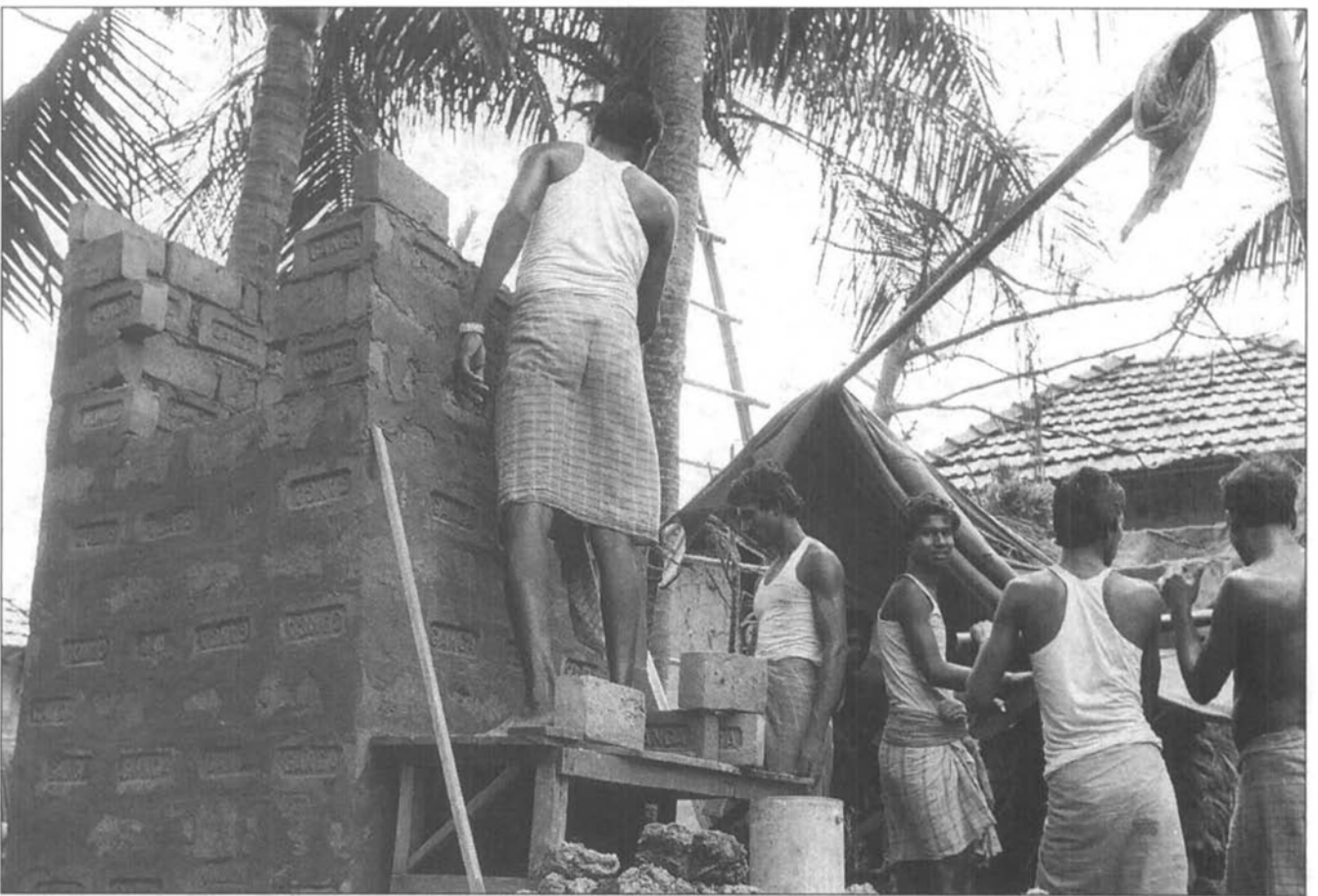
Principles

Hopefully, institutions charged with promoting sanitation will both consider the principles, and search for mechanisms that will enable them to put these principles into place. Many good mechanisms already exist, and have been applied effectively on a small scale. These include a variety of participatory methods which empower individuals and communities to identify their own problems and to act; social



Paul Harris

Taking tips from TNCs? ‘The concept and the facilities may need to be marketed to increase demand.’



Jan Hammond/WaterAid/Panos Pictures

Access to decent sanitation should not be the exclusive right of the rich — innovative financing schemes are essential.

marketing and social mobilization methods which sell concepts and mobilize all facets of society to a cause; approaches through schools and children; and innovative financing mechanisms which enable even the poorest families to participate.

The working group debated at length the pros and cons of willingness-to-pay

studies and latrine subsidies. All the evidence indicates that the benefits of these mechanisms vary, depending on the circumstances. Principles are extremely important; they should define both policy and practice. They must be transparent, and agreed by communities and users. While government agencies would probably take the

lead in identifying the principles with input from those with different experience in the sector, especially that of NGOs, the donor community and other external agencies supporting national sanitation efforts should be aware of the principles and act accordingly.

Politics

The working group considered political commitment at all levels to be a prerequisite for sanitation promotion. There are a number of techniques for acquiring political commitment, such as using advocacy statements at every opportunity, trying to integrate sanitation issues into other sectors, and offering sanitation awards to politicians. Communities seem more likely to be enthusiastic about a sanitation project they know has strong political support.

Professionalism

The promotion of sanitation is actually rather complicated and, therefore, the sector needs not only a variety of specialists, such as social scientists, community-development specialists, marketing specialists, engineers, and economists, but also needs people who are trained to appreciate the roles of all of these professions, to recognize when they should be brought into a project. The sector also needs more sanitation

A recipe for successful sanitation

Incorporate the following features:

- a learning approach. Flex, change, and innovate until you get it right;
- focus on demand creation;
- use social marketing and participatory approaches together;
- create an environment in which private producers can thrive;
- define 'acceptable' latrines loosely, and obtain political support at a senior level for a less rigid range of good technologies;
- consider what people are already doing, and help them to do it better. This includes building on existing, good technologies;
- offer a range of technical options that are affordable without subsidy;
- introduce new latrine options through more prosperous, higher-status people in the community — communities usually assume that such people will take risks and be the first to try new things;
- let the community know that the sanitation programmes have political support at the highest level;
- involve schools, and children in the community. Schools are the entry point to the community;
- combine facilities with behavioural-change strategies;
- build on existing community organizations, rather than creating new ones;
- encourage community groups to formulate their own hygiene-education programmes, their own messages, and their own methods;
- use female and male extension workers;
- build capacity for community management of the project; and
- implement training and human resources development at all levels.

Guiding principles*

- From an epidemiological point of view, sanitation is the first barrier to many faecally transmitted diseases, and its effectiveness improves when integrated with improved water supply and behavioural change. Improvements in hygiene practices alone, however, can result in disease reduction, and can serve as a valid programme objective.
- Sanitation comprises both behaviour and facilities, which should be promoted together to maximize health and socio-economic benefits.
- From an implementation point of view, sanitation should be treated as a priority issue in its own right, and not simply as an add-on to more attractive water-supply programmes.
- Sanitation requires its own resources and timeframe to achieve optimal results.
- Political will is a must; communities are more motivated to change when they know the political will exists.
- Communities are bio-cultural systems. A sanitary environment is a successful interaction of the key parts of that system: the waste; the natural environment with its unique physical, chemical, and biological processes; local cultural beliefs and practices; a sanitation technology, and the management practices applied to the technology.
- Sanitation programmes should be based upon generating demand, with its implications for education and participation, rather than the provision of free or subsidized infrastructure. Governments should be responsible for the protection of public health. Government sanitation policy should be to create demand for services, facilitating and enhancing partnership among the private sector, NGO-based organizations, and local authorities, and removing obstacles in the paths of each of these, and of households, in the achievement of improved sanitation.
- Sanitation programmes should address equally the needs, preferences, and behaviour of children, women, and men. Programmes should take a gender sensitive approach but, learning from the mistakes of other sectors, should guard against directing messages only to women, or placing the burden of improved sanitation primarily upon women.
- Sanitation improvements should be approached incrementally, based on local beliefs and practices, and working towards small, lasting improvements that are sustainable at each step, rather than the wholesale introduction of new systems.
- User ownership of sanitation decisions is vital to sustainability. Empowerment is often a necessary step to achieving a sense of ownership, and responsibility for sanitation improvements.
- Good methods of public-health education and participation, especially social marketing, social mobilization, and promotion through schools and children, exist to promote and sustain sanitation improvements.
- Sanitation services should be prioritized for high-risk, under-served groups in countries where universal coverage seems unlikely in the foreseeable future. Hygiene promotion should be targeted to all.



● Latrines are consumer products: their design and promotion should follow good marketing principles, including a range of options, designs attractive to consumers and, therefore, based upon consumer preferences, affordable, and appropriate to local environmental conditions. Basic marketing research and participation in design are likely to be essential components of good programmes. Market forces are best understood by the private sector. As in all other public health programmes aimed at preventing disease, promoting sanitation should be a continuous activity, necessary to sustain past achievements, and to ensure that future generations do not become complacent as diseases decrease.

* As identified by the WSSCC working group.

societies and journals, more research, and more mechanisms for exchanging information; the increasing availability of e-mail is a great opportunity.

Potties

No discussion of sanitation would be complete without a reference to technology. The working group felt strongly that the sector must continue to innovate low-cost sanitation facilities for people with different needs, from different climates, and with different customs. One failing of the sector is its tendency to choose one or two technologies and push them as 'the solution.'

As in all consumer products, a particular product will probably be right for a section of the market, but not for all consumers and conditions. Current technologies that are considered to be 'hygienic' — which usually means no smell and no flies — are often far too expensive for the poor. More research and better designs for different conditions are still needed.

We often also ignore the need in some societies to recycle human waste as fertilizer, as they have done for centuries. Human waste can be rendered harmless, and latrine designs that do this in harmony with agricultural and social customs hold promise for the future.

What you can do

Every professional in the water and sanitation sector can contribute to the promotion of sanitation:

- Advocate within your own institution to consider the principles which should underpin your programme.
- Advocate sanitation to politicians and to professionals in other sectors.
- Take them round successful sanitation projects which demonstrate how it should be done.
- Encourage the formation of a professional society devoted to sanitation and a mechanism for the exchange of information.
- Most important of all, ask the individuals who make up the communities for advice on how to make their sanitation better, and take this information back to your colleagues.

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