

A beauty contest for toilets

Promoting the use of sanitation facilities in India

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Providing sufficient toilet access is key to meeting health and sanitation targets. But it is difficult to ensure that facilities are used properly and maintained.

An innovative post-tsunami project in a remote Indian village has provided a timely reminder that behavioural change is a slow process requiring local ownership and 'out of the box' thinking.

In the aftermath of the 2004 Asian tsunami, two non-profit organizations were created - Friend-in-Need (FIN) Trust in India and its partner organisation, Association Un Ami, in France. Their purpose was to initiate rehabilitation projects in the village of Kameshwaram, along the Tamil Nadu coast in southeast India. In collaboration with UNICEF and SCOPE, an Indian NGO, FIN Trust mobilised resources to build approximately 250 toilets. These toilets would provide sanitation facilities for 20% of the village.

Elevating the status of sanitation

During a monitoring mission three months after the toilets were built, we noticed a distinct gender divide in the use of the facilities. Although women appreciated the security and privacy, the majority of the men continued to use the open fields, just as they had always done.

It was clear to us that we would need to have frank and open discussions on this subject in order to improve sanitation practices in the village. During home visits we had noticed that the prized area in many houses was the corner dedicated to the television. The television cabinet was often decorated with pictures of gods, ancestors and other family knick-knacks, so that it resembled the prayer and ancestor worship area in a traditional home. As can be expected, no one said, 'you must come see our new toilet, I'm so proud of it?!'

This simple observation led to an idea: what if we could make villagers as proud of their toilet as they are of their TV areas?

A beauty contest for toilets

This is how the idea for a Kameshwaram beauty contest for toilets came about. The first contest, held in July 2007, was only open to families in which both men and women used the toilets. Substantial cash prizes were awarded to winners, which were equivalent to an average monthly



The next step was to develop criteria on which the toilets would be judged. The project had promoted the construction of the simple but effective EcoSan toilet system, in which dry waste is separated from liquid and converted into fertiliser for the garden. To enhance this holistic approach we came up with three interrelated 'sub-contests': the productivity and layout of the kitchen garden, the external appearance and cleanliness of the toilet and its immediate surroundings, and any innovation introduced in the functionality or structure of the toilet. Three prizes would be

awarded for each sub-contest: a first prize of Rs.5000 and runner-up prizes of Rs.2500 and Rs.1500. All other participants would receive Rs.150.

Successful outcome

Even before judging began, it was clear that the competition had succeeded in raising the profile of sanitation issues. The participation rate of 71% families revealed record numbers of men using toilets.

A year after the end of the first competition, it was more common for men to use toilets, and toilets were viewed as an essential part of a home. There has been increased demand for toilets, with an additional 100 toilets built so far. The project is raising additional resources to ensure complete coverage in the village. Because of the increase in toilet use, the government has designated Kameshwaram a model village, and the EcoSan toilets attract regular visitors. The next contest is scheduled to begin in May 2009. Given the enthusiasm they have generated, it is clear that the toilets are now widely regarded as tools for gaining social visibility and prestige.

Lessons learned

It is important to keep in mind that maintaining toilets is an added burden, especially for women and poor households. It is necessary to focus on communicating the long-term health and economic advantages of good hygiene, and to use competitions to reinforce good practices.

Linked to this is the need to ensure a fair and objective competition that is not influenced by social class and political dynamics within the village. The use of unbiased judges from outside the village is an important element of building the trust of participants.

Finally, it is essential to document and publicise the innovations or best practices introduced by the winners. Future competitions will incorporate preparatory workshops to give villagers an opportunity to share improvements, and to learn about good sanitation practices.

Links

www.friend-in-need.org