

Time for toilet talk

The Ottawa Citizen

Published: Tuesday, November 27, 2007



The simplest things make the difference between a long, productive life and a short, miserable one. There's nothing more basic, or more important, than a toilet.

Toilets -- specifically clean, safe toilets and latrines -- save lives. Yet, they don't have the cachet of bednets or the emotional appeal of Christmas goats. People in rich countries don't wear toilet pins on their lapels or Make Diarrhea History wristbands.

Not yet, anyway. In 2008, though, the humble toilet could become a ubiquitous symbol of development, peace and security. The United Nations has declared 2008 the Year of Sanitation -- in other words, the year of making sure that people have access to clean water and safe places to relieve themselves.

Several charities and non-governmental organization have been working already to bring attention to this basic issue. They've recently created a coalition in Canada called SWAN (Sanitation and Water Action Network).

The network says 2.6 billion people (nearly half the world's population) live without access to toilets or latrines that are separated from the other activities of daily life. This is a major cause of disease -- just think of the stories of London, or of Ottawa for that matter, before the advent of sewers.

It is also a security risk. People without toilet facilities do what humans and other animals have always done -- they leave the protective circle of their societies, seeking makeshift waste areas. In conflict zones, the simple act of relieving oneself can involve serious risk. Girls and women are at particular risk in many societies: they seek privacy under the cover of darkness, and become the victims of rape, harassment, torture or abduction.

The absence of cleanliness and privacy might also keep girls from pursuing opportunities. It's hard enough for a 13-year-old girl to deal with the new challenges of menstruation, even in the wealthy world. If girls attend schools without private latrines, they might choose to stay home for several days at a time, and fall behind in their studies.

One of the targets of the Millennium Development Goals is to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation by 2015. "Basic sanitation" really does mean basic sanitation, as in covered pit latrines in rural areas.

Several of the millennium goals are actually on track in many parts of the world, but the sanitation target isn't one of them. It's the target the world is least likely to achieve. That means more children will die of dysentery, more mothers will be ravaged by cholera.

It's not as if humanity lacks the technology; it's not as if safe latrines are expensive. In fact, sanitation is something many poor communities can afford to take care of themselves, once they've got the expertise and awareness. The only thing stopping us is will -- and, perhaps, squeamishness. Sanitation isn't a topic for polite society.

Just as it has been necessary to break the taboo attached to AIDS, it is necessary to talk about latrines and toilets. Canada, which has a tradition of pragmatism and compassion, should be leading this conversation and leading the work to create basic sanitation in developing countries. The simplest way to do that is to support the new Global Sanitation Fund.

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