

The International Year of Sanitation: How to Succeed for Billions in Need

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by

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Dear Friends in SWAN Canada,

Hello to you from the Water Supply and Sanitation and Collaborative Council, and thank you very much for asking me to speak to you at your meeting. I am very sorry that I cannot be there in person, but it is great to have this opportunity to say a few words to you by video.

I am just going to say a few things, first about the International Year of Sanitation, and then about a couple of points that are specifically relevant to Canada.

I am really pleased that you have asked me to speak because I have studied a lot of the work you have done at Swan Canada, and I think it's great. The way that you are mobilising not only organisations, but members of the public, to carry out advocacy in your country, is exemplary. I wish that there were more people who were equally active in other countries as well. Thank you very much for that.

I can also see from the letters that you have written to ministers, and so on, that you have a really detailed understanding of sanitation issues, so I'm not going to preach to you about sanitation, because you know about it any way.

I would like to make just a couple of points, if I may, about the International Year of Sanitation. It is principally, as you have yourselves clearly sported, a political activity. The whole point of International Year of Sanitation is to raise sanitation as a political issue with leaders all around the world. We have deliberately focused on five key messages, and these are those that I've also seen on your website and in your literature. They are:

1. The message that sanitation contributes to health, which is really the type of argument that we have generally used as health professionals over the past years. Those are quite well-rehearsed arguments.
2. The second message is that sanitation benefits economic development. I think there is quite an interesting new angle on this in terms of cost effectiveness. The recent work, for

example, of the Disease Control Priorities Project, shows that sanitation interventions -- particularly those in hygiene promotion -- are the most cost effective interventions of all health work around the world. There are some powerful arguments on economic benefits, and those are the sorts of argument that key policy makers particularly respond to.

3. The third key message -- that of sanitation promoting social development -- reflects the kinds of considerations that people themselves have. That sanitation is a point of dignity, status or convenience, we know, is a reason why people actually work to improve sanitation. I think it is important for us as to explain this more widely.

4. The fourth message relating to sanitation is on the benefits to the environment. These have been rather underused arguments in the past, particularly the point of poor sanitation affecting the quality of drinking water supply, for example. This message will become increasingly important in the future.

So those are four, we could say, "thematic messages", but I also want to highlight here the fifth key message for the International Year of Sanitation, which is

5. Sanitation is achievable. This is something that I feel very passionately about. We hear a lot of rather gloomy, pessimistic analysis, particularly about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yes, it is true that sanitation is lacking very badly if you look at the various MDG targets; I would say that sanitation and maternal mortality are the two that are really lagging furthest behind. But I am actually quite optimistic that we really can achieve significant acceleration of progress in sanitation if we really get down to the hard work of doing sanitation programmes. Sanitation work in the field is very hard. It includes social, technical and political activities, and there is no substitute for the sheer house by house, community by community effort required -- but I think we can do that. The other aspect which is really positive -- and a lot of the work that you yourselves are doing -- is that sanitation is being brought into the general language of development and the priorities of development. That is really vital, because it has been a topic that has been hidden away and not talked about. Getting sanitation issues into the opening is great, as is generating political leadership and partnership. We have seen a lot of that around the world, not only among the developed nations, but particularly among political leadership, for example, in Africa, as seen recently at the AfricaSan conference. I think there are quite a lot of causes for optimism that sanitation really is poised to make very significant progress over the next few years.

So those are a couple of the observations about the International Year of Sanitation in general.

To continue, I have two particular points which I think are relevant to Canada, and I hope these will resonate with you and with the advocacy work that you are carrying out.

The first point is to urge the Canadian Government to put more resources into sanitation. What has happened -- and I think is maybe happening in Canada -- is that very many financing agencies say they are putting money into water and sanitation, but actually, when you disaggregate the figures, you find that the vast majority of their support is going into water and not into sanitation.

I hear rather stale arguments from donors, who say, "Oh, sanitation must be done together with water." Now, 20 years ago that was what we thought, but what we have now learned and deeply understood over the years is that, actually, sanitation is very different from water, and it is

different because it requires different skills sets. As I mentioned a moment ago, the really tough work in sanitation is not technical or engineering work. It is the social development work, and the understanding about people and their priorities and the work on promoting sanitation with them. So, you need different sorts of staff members to do sanitation work; you are operating on different time scales; and the work is quite different from the work done in a water programme.

Actually, we have lost a lot of time in terms of our progress on sanitation precisely because people have bracketed it with water. And now we are at a stage where I am absolutely certain that we should be prioritising sanitation as an activity entirely in its own right. That is a very fundamental and important point, and that is exactly what we are doing at the Collaborative Council. We are throwing all of our energy into sanitation because we can see that it had been so neglected compared with water.

That brings me to my second point, which is that we urge the Canadian Government to become one of the supporters of Collaborative Council's Global Sanitation Fund (GSF). The GSF is the world's first financing mechanism specifically for sanitation and not for water, and it is very carefully targeted towards the countries and the people that have the most need of sanitation.

Now, people criticise us and say, "Oh, it is yet another vertical multi-donor fund. We don't need more vertical funds". I think that is absolutely wrong, because in the sanitation sector, there aren't any funds for sanitation, whether vertical or otherwise. Yes, I know in the health sector, there are many specialist vertical funds, and I understand the sorts of comments and criticisms that people make. But I really feel that in sanitation, because our sector is lacking so much behind others, we need the specific injection of energy and money that a dedicated -- yes vertical -- fund can provide.

I want to make it very clear that the GSF is not some new organisation. It is simply a financing mechanism within the Collaborative Council, which itself has been going on for 20 years. Also, the Global Sanitation Fund is not about setting up parallel structure in countries. The Global Sanitation Fund is supporting national efforts to boost sanitation, so the work it is financing is work that comes under national sanitation policies and which respects the leadership and directions given by the governments of those countries. We are absolutely not bypassing governments or setting up parallel systems. I think there is a very powerful case for Canada to be among the growing group of donors who are contributing to the Global Sanitation Fund.

I would like to finish with a direct comment to the politicians and decision-makers within the Canadian government. It is to simply say this: when you are at home this evening, and you are sitting comfortably on your nice clean toilet, in a private place behind a locked door, just think about those 2.6 billion people who are queuing up outside the door to use that toilet. Then, just ask yourself, have you done everything that you possibly could to help those people?

Thank you very much.