

**Community Sanitation [Community Toilets]:  
What are the appropriate approaches, and in what specific contexts can they be applied?**

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As more and more of the world's population moves to cities, community-managed toilet facilities will become increasingly important. This is especially true for densely populated areas known as slums or *bastis*, where there often is not enough space for single-household toilets. Effectively managed community toilets are essential to the future of healthy and clean cities. So they will always be a part of any effective urban sanitation initiative in cities with slums.

Although community toilets are a necessity in urban slums, they also can be found in certain rural situations. For example, in southeastern Bangladesh some large residential compounds (*baris*) have community toilets for use of men and guests.

A community toilet is different from a public toilet. Public toilets, equally important to the urban environment, are for the use of any anonymous passer-by, shopper, bus or train passenger, etc. A community toilet, on the other hand, is a facility installed for a specific group of neighboring families, who may or may not be related; but they do know each other. They use them on a daily basis. Such facilities are essential neighborhood infrastructure. Sharing and cleaning can be emotional matters. When one family shirks its responsibility and leaves a mess behind, tempers will flare up, creating or aggravating tension between households. Another,

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more positive scenario is, a group of families installs and cares for a nice toilet, feeling proud to share it with visitors. One village I visited in Chittagong District keeps some roadside toilets available for the hundreds of visitors who arrive each year for a festival celebration. These are locked during the year, to keep them in good shape for visitors' use. They are community toilets in the sense that the village takes a personal interest in their condition, even though they function as public toilets during the festival. In some ways any toilet used by more than one household can be regarded as a "community" facility. The complexity and risks of managing them has led the WHO-UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program to define all toilets shared by more than one household as "unimproved."

Unimproved or not, community toilets are needed. Slum dwellers need them. Renters in congested "colonies" need them. Nomadic groups need them. (Bangladesh's *Bedde*, for example) Refugees and people in cyclone shelters need them.

Many NGOs, especially those working in slums, have sincerely tried to provide community toilets and guide or support users, with mixed results. Urban governments also have tried in some cases, but I have observed their efforts to be mostly not successful.

There is an urgent need for more research on community toilets: where they are effective or not, and what factors lead to success or failure of maintenance. A good start would be case studies of positive *and* negative situations in large, medium, and small communities, with careful attention to the mode of introduction, maintenance arrangements, and the relationships among community users. About the mode of introduction, community-led total sanitation approaches have been used to set up community toilets in several countries, including Zambia, India, and Bangladesh. But participatory strategies – CLTS and others – need to be modified in situations with mobile populations. Families in these situations cannot be expected to have the stable

relationships and functional local problem-solving institutions that are common in established rural communities. Urban people also tend to be quite busy, not always available for prolonged meetings, committee work, and so on. They may or may not trust each other. They are not likely to own their homes. Women's and men's interest in the environment may differ.

One researcher observes that “urban CLTS adaptations have focussed on empowering citizens to demand their rights, bringing together different stakeholders,” (Snel 2015) the municipality, landlords, and tenants, to discuss sanitation issues. Cleaning and waste-removal arrangements are likely to vary from place to place. Women may perceive a need for the community toilets more than men. And they may be more willing to spend time and money to keep them in good condition. Case studies could help to illuminate the reasons why the facilities either succeed or fail. Larger-scale research could follow, to test hypotheses about social dynamics associated with community toilets and the utility of various technical options.

Moving beyond the community of users, urban settlements and their community toilets need to be understood as part of a much larger context. Part of it is enforcement of laws or government directives banning open defecation. Landlords or others renting out property may have significant responsibilities for the quality and maintenance of community toilets. House renters do not have the right to build toilets, even if they want to. Sector professionals mostly seem to agree that community priorities are important, but these need to be understood in the context of the wider sanitation chain. Dealing with fecal sludge in urban areas, for example, requires resources, technologies, and organization beyond the capacity of most so-called “communities.”

Policy guidelines are helpful, and political commitment to public health improvement is essential. Neighborhood-level action is not enough. Those who seek to create effective

community sanitation systems need to maintain good relationships with multiple municipal departments, governmental officers, and political leaders. At present the level of knowledge, technical capacity, and staffing of these groups often is not up to the mark.

A recent round-table discussion on urban sanitation hosted by IRC (2015) came up with some helpful principles and observations:

- Healthy, clean and prosperous cities [and crowded rural settlements] are “a huge public benefit.”
- Scaling-up with quality is more challenging in urban areas than in rural villages.
- A multi-stakeholder approach involving empowered citizens, the media and public-private partnerships is required.
- Secure land tenure is crucial for investment in sanitation
- Strong involvement and commitment of community members can lead to sustainable results, but urban slum dwellers do not have the total decision-making control that rural villagers mostly have. They lack space and may live under constant threat of eviction.
- INGOs cannot manage the full sanitation chain on their own. Their inputs are time-limited. They need an exit strategy supported by local government and indigenous NGOs to sustain and scale up improvements.

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