



Calling for Good Governance for Better Sanitation in Nepal – How Do the Dry Toilets Fit In?

Ms Sanna-Leena Rautanen, Research Scientist
Tampere University of Technology, Finland
E-mail: srautanen@yahoo.co.uk

Keywords: Nepal, rural, sanitation, options, governance

ABSTRACT

After decades of efforts to improve sanitation in Nepal, the latrine coverage is still amongst the lowest in the South Asia region. Even subsidised sanitation programmes have not managed to get sustainable results. Water-seal two-pit Sulabh latrine is the one option commonly advocated by various sanitation programmes, even in the water scarce areas. Poverty is often identified as the main reason why latrines are not constructed, or why the subsidised latrines are not completed. This paper studies the linkage between poverty and sanitation. In what ways poverty is the reason for not constructing and using a latrine? What characterises those who do have a latrine and those who do not? Why would anyone try dry sanitation if any type of sanitation is an alien concept? Where does sanitation improvement fall in the overall governance? This study represents the findings from a series of sanitation monitoring studies conducted in the Finnish supported Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Support Programme (RWSSSP) working areas in the Western Development Region, Nepal. In the RWSSSP, the impact of years of sanitation awareness work was becoming visible towards the end of the programme as the demand for sanitation-only schemes from the communities rose rapidly. Still the studies made during the final operational year 2004 found a number of villages where everyone practiced open defecation with not a single latrine in the area. Especially in Terai districts it was felt that in these areas of poor sanitation, not all that was enthusiastically started to improve the situation was completed. The technology options could have been more numerous, yet, the failed pit-latrines in the past had made dry sanitation options undesirable. The RWSSSP mainly advocated different materials for upper structures. It was felt that more real life experience and piloting in the climatically different regions was needed to be more confident in promoting alternatives. Sanitation is also a governance issue, whether dry or not dry. Dry sanitation is an aspect of a healthy environment, which in turn is an issue and concern for local governance rather than for an international programme or random non-governmental activity.



INTRODUCTION

This paper introduces the lessons learned in the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Support Programme Phase III (RWSSSP). RWSSSP was a joint programme supported by the governments of Nepal and Finland in eight districts in Western Nepal. The RWSSSP Phase III purpose was to contribute to water supply and sanitation coverage through;

- (1) improvement of the institutional capacity of the districts to enable decentralization from the national level to the districts and from district to users for implementation and sustainable management of rural water supply and sanitation,
- (2) provision of financial support for implementation; and
- (3) improvement of methods in implementing and operating and maintaining water supply and sanitation facilities.

RWSSSP Phase III was executed under the Department of Local Infrastructure Development and Agricultural Roads (DoLIDAR), of the Ministry of Local Development. Water and/or Sanitation Users Committees (WUCs) as democratically elected representatives of the users had a central role to play in all activities at the scheme level. RWSSSP Phase III entrusted WUCs with procurement of the materials and financial management of the scheme budget through WUC Accounts. WUCs were supported by technical and social Support Organizations, including local Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and Community-Based Organisations (CBOs). These were selected by the District Project Management Teams in each district. The eight District Projects and WUCs implemented some 900 water or/and sanitation schemes in the Phase III alone.

RWSSSP was one of the first ones to explore the popularity of having sanitation and environmental sanitation schemes as schemes of their own right, not as an attachment to water supply schemes. RWSSSP succeeded in this, and the popularity of sanitation schemes increased exponentially towards the end of the Phase III. The quantitative target for sanitation coverage at the beginning of the Phase III was set to cover a population of 52,000. This was exceeded as about 307,000 people benefited from the latrines constructed during the RWSSSP Phase III alone.

RWSSSP sanitation schemes supported the construction of two or one-pit water seal Sulabh latrines up to the plinth level, leaving the upper structure for the householders. It could be claimed that the latrines constructed in RWSSSP were too subsidised even if the stakeholders rather discussed about “encouragement grants” rather than “subsidies”. RWSSSP put effort in hygiene and sanitation education, and Local Latrine Builders were trained. The local CBOs, in sanitation most notably the Mother Groups, mobilised communities and generally advocated good sanitation practices. In some villages the women managed to accomplish their total sanitation coverage target. RWSSSP further supported such events as National Sanitation Week celebrations to give sanitation visibility and higher profile.



OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The challenge of the past sanitation efforts is continuity and sustainability: whether the latrines constructed are abandoned, not used or never even completed. As any decentralised sanitation installation, also Sulabh-latrines will have to be maintained and eventually emptied: will this be done? Poverty is often identified as the main reason why latrines are not constructed in the first place, or why the subsidised latrines are not completed. This paper studies the linkage between poverty, good governance and sanitation in Nepal. In what ways poverty was the reason for not constructing and using a latrine? Why would anyone try dry sanitation if any type of sanitation is an alien concept? How sanitation is a governance issue? The study utilises previously unpublished sanitation-related monitoring data collected for the programme use at the end of the RWSSSP Phase III, supplemented with outcome from six post-construction workshops held for the Phase I and Phase II WUCs.

RESULTS FROM THE FIELD OBSERVATIONS

Case Tarai: Sarawal and Kumarwati VDCs, Nawalparasi District

Nawalparasi District is located in Tarai along the Indian border in Western Nepal. Two village development committees chosen for presentation here represent the more progressive Village Development Committees in terms of sanitation, see Figure 1. In Kumarwati VDC 62 latrines were observed, of which 56 were constructed in a RWSSSP. Majority were two-pit water seal (Sulabh) latrines. Of all these 69 percent were complete with permanent upper structure. Only two persons reported having known how much the latrine will cost in total, and one of these was the self-help household. In Sarawal VDC 46 latrines were observed, all constructed in a RWSSSP scheme. Majority, 42, were two-pit water seal (Sulabh) latrines. Of all these 41 percent were complete with permanent upper structure. Here seven persons reported having known what was going to be the total cost.

In Sarawal 61 percent of the observed latrines showed signs of active use, with 63 percent of the respondents reporting the same. The figure gets worse when looking at who does not use the latrine. Out of those who reported using the latrine, 33 percent reported that not all use the latrine. Of these half reported that small children are not using the latrines. There were only four latrines that had had the pits emptied. In two cases the pit was emptied after one year, in one case after two years and in one case after four years.

Easy access and the question whether the latrine is used were correlated. Accessibility was surprisingly a problem as 33 percent of the latrines were according to the enumerators' observation quite far and seven percent not accessible when it gets dark. Out of those which were "quite far" a staggering 87 percent were also not complete, and out of those that were not accessible when it gets dark, one was not complete. These are significant figures considering the total number of 46 latrines observed in Sarawal. First interpretation may be that the latrines are not complete because if they are quite far,

perhaps they were not meant to be used or completed in the first place. The second is simply that this is coincidental.

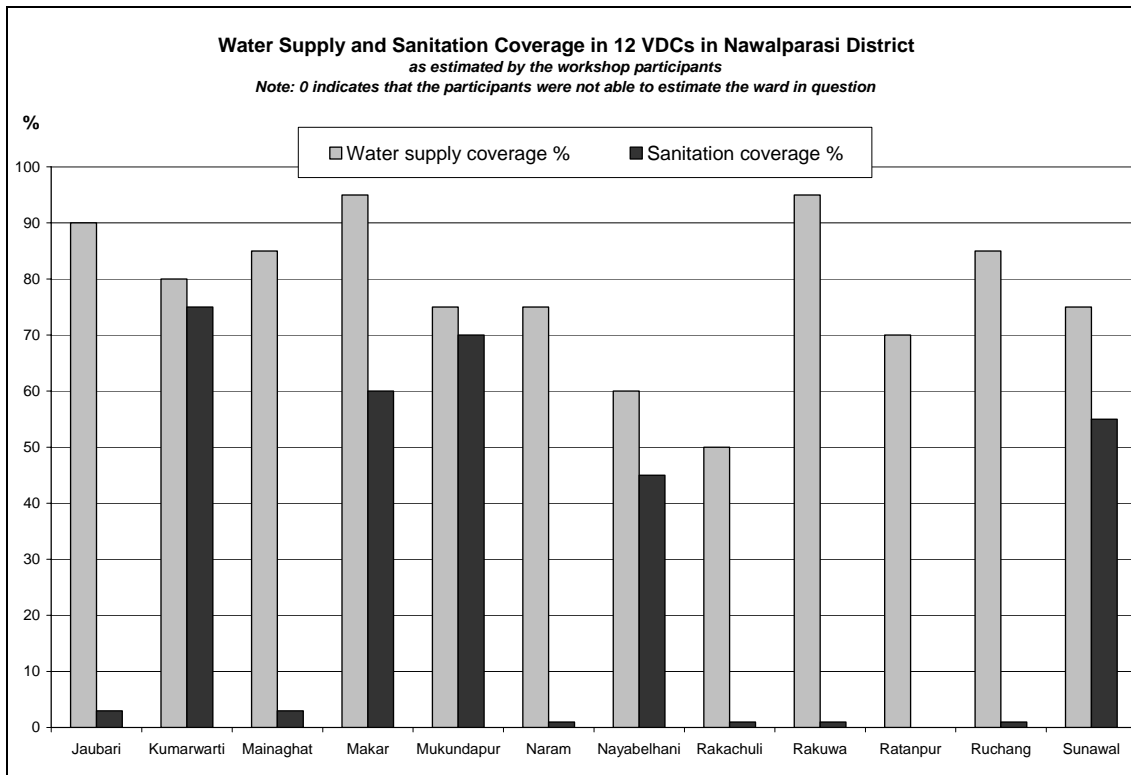


Figure 1. Water supply and sanitation coverage in 12 VDC in Nawalparasi District

Case Hill: Thulolumpek VDC, Gulmi District

Thulolumpek VDC in Gulmi District is an exceptional Village Development Committees in its commitment to achieve full sanitation coverage. In total 1319 people in Thulolumpek have benefited from the 1046 latrines constructed over the years in RWSSSP. The latrines are used even if they were not complete with permanent upper structures. The correlation coefficient between whether the latrine was used and whether the owner knew the total cost before joining the scheme, is practically zero at 0.08, with 84 percent of the respondents stating that they did not know how much the latrine was going to cost.

Majority of the latrines were clean inside (85%) and were not smelly (84%). Slightly less had water available: 74 percent had water available inside the latrine during the enumerators visit, and 81 percent had water available for hand washing somewhere near by. There were a remarkably strong correlation between the latrine being clean inside and yet, showing signs of active use. Thulolumpek is a prime example of the results of committed local leadership: sanitation was given a high priority both at the community level and local government levels, and step by step the complete Village Development Committees area has been covered.



MORE RESULTS: PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

The participants in a series of post-construction workshops organised in all six districts of the Lumbini Zone raised the following sanitation-related problems, some of them being common between the communities, and some of them being very site-specific:

- *Policy issues:* Village Development Committees and District Development Committees do not pay full attention to sanitation and do not prioritise it. In the past sanitation schemes have been considered as secondary projects, an attachment to water supply projects.
- *Technical issues:* WUC and the users do not have technical know-how, and not enough people are being trained as latrine builders. Due to the lack of technical know-how the latrine owners are facing such problems as gas leak out which in turn, will further aggravate negative attitudes towards constructing latrines.
- *Follow up and monitoring:* The follow up and monitoring system is not functioning well. It was reported that the new latrine owners are not motivated in absence of the follow up from the Programme. Latrine owners had to wait for the arrival of a technician for a long time, and sometimes the latrines were not completed at all.
- *Participation:* Participation is a key factor for the sustainability of activities. The latrine owners were not fully participating in the schemes in terms of providing their share of the cash and/or kind contributions *towards their own latrines*. They were reportedly not motivated and not showing keen interest to construct the latrines.
- *Lack of water source:* Water supply facilities were not always available. The Programme had provided rainwater harvesting facilities to hill tops and other water scarce places. However, during the dry seasons rainwater is not sufficient for latrine flushing. Without sufficient and reliable water source latrine construction was not considered feasible.
- *Seasonal mobility:* The traditional practice of seasonal mobility was also seen as hampering the latrine construction especially in the Hills. During the winter season the villagers are shifted to the bottom of the village and during the summer season to the hill. Where is the right place for the permanent latrines?
- *Limit of space:* Some of the villagers have limited land or no land at all. Those families who have less space are also lacking behind with sanitation.
- *Poverty and awareness:* The participants also raised broad and cross-cutting poverty and awareness issues. The reasons for not constructing latrines were reported to be lack of awareness, not changing one's behaviour and attitudes, etc. The level of awareness obviously varied place to place, and from household to household. All households were not able to construct the latrine at the same time due to seasonal availability of cash and time.

WUCs, Village Development Committees and users had also taken own initiative to solve some of the sanitation problems, also those listed above. Based on their experiences, they recommended the following:

- *Prioritise sanitation issues:* Some Village Development Committees have paid special attention to sanitation and clearly prioritised it. A group of follow up team



- had also been formed to monitor the sanitation activities in cooperation with the Sub-Health Post.
- *Fund management to carry out sanitation activities:* Some of the more progressive Village Development Committees had provided small grants to the users for latrine construction. The WUCs had also raised funds from other organizations and programmes than RWSSSP. One WUC had started to collect sanitation funds during a festival with a good success.
 - *Establish coordination and networking channel:* Networking and coordination was considered important, and a number of potential partners were identified including Small Farmer Development Project, Women's Development Office at District level, Nepal Red Cross Society and other (I) NGOs.
 - *Training:* The users received the Health and Sanitation Education (HSE) organised by the WUC in close cooperation with the support organisation (SO) and the Programme. It helped to throw the light in the attitude of people. Also pressure groups were formed among the women to raise sanitation awareness in the villages.
 - *Technical guidance:* The WUCs have provided technical assistance, materials and funds to the users. However, many WUCs were not fully aware of the technical aspects of latrine construction including the various designs and available local materials. A demand for all non-local construction materials was expressed as many communities have an understanding that a latrine has to be made of cement, bricks or stones, and have tin roofs. Somehow the local materials that are good for an ordinary house are no good for latrine.

The WUCs were highly aware of the linkage between health and good sanitation. On the other hand, they also acknowledged that awareness campaigns were a continuous and never ending process. They suggested that the training should be ethnicity/caste sensitive, and all ethnic and caste groups should be encouraged, and that the training package should be revised to focus on the group development, institutional development and social mobilisation processes as well. The WUCs and Female Community Health Volunteers can engage in awareness activities and make materials available, and the local latrine builders can do the actual construction. Public toilets were considered necessary especially in marketplaces, schools and public offices.

THE GOVERNANCE DISCUSSION

How does governance fit into this sanitation dilemma? Governance can be defined as *“the complex set of mechanisms, processes, relationships, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and obligations, and mediate their differences. Governance encompasses all the methods – good and bad – that societies use to distribute power and manage public resources and problems. In sound governance, public resources and problems are managed effectively, efficiently, and in response to the critical needs of society. Effective democratic forms of governance rely on public participation, accountability, and transparency.”* (UNDP 1997, in: Nepal Human Development Report 2001 – Poverty Reduction and Governance. 2002. United Nations Development Programme, Nepal, Kathmandu. 128 p. <http://www.undp.org.np>)



Many of the problems and solutions identified earlier concern these issues: through continued advocacy work sanitation has reached a level where it can be called as a public interest and possibly a matter of public resources even if the facilities as such are private property. Keeping the environment healthy and sanitary is certainly a citizen's obligation and at the same time, also a right. As sanitation is a very local and even household specific dilemma, local governance should provide the institutional frame of reference where these interests could be articulated and translated into action. To gain the full benefits from sanitation, all households should comply! The only option is to systematically work towards full coverage, and this is where local governments as community planners step in.

Many workshop participants saw institutional development as a key factor for the continued construction and sustainability of existing sanitation facilities, referring to both WUCs and Village Development Committees. WUCs called for an established, functional code of practice to manage water and sanitation issues between the users, WUC, Village Development Committees, and District Development Committees, to secure social mobilisation and the resources to carry on. As was seen earlier, some of the more progressive VDCs had already established small sanitation funds in their annual budgets from which zero interest loans were given for latrine construction.

Why would anyone try dry sanitation if any type of sanitation is an alien concept? Theoretically, if all sanitation options are equally unfamiliar or equally repulsive, then any option should be equally acceptable (or unacceptable). Advocacy and real life experience cast the foundations for the future latrines. Sulbah-latrines have been successfully applied to demonstrate that sanitation as such is not the same as a vile hole in the yard. It is time to find a dry or low-water use options that can do the same and overcome the past experience with failed pit-latrines. Again, here is room for the local government intervention in terms of constructing public pilot latrines to introduce the various options for the citizen's.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The RWSSSP mainly advocated different materials for upper structures without touching the dry sanitation concept. It was felt that more real life experience and piloting in the climatically different regions was needed to be more confident in promoting these alternatives. There was also some local resistance to bring in new technology choices now that the Sulabh latrine had been successfully introduced and people were getting familiar with the technology.

The fact remains that household latrines are ultimately private property. Demand for them should be as numerous as is the number of households without latrines. At the same time the hygiene and sanitation education has resulted in the increased demand for sanitation programmes, as was evident towards the end of RWSSSP. Yet, to respond to all demand through subsidies is an impossible equation: no programme or local government can subsidise each and every one of the millions of missing latrines in the region. Subsidies have not even proven out to lead to sustainable results. Perhaps thousands of latrines have been abandoned when it came to emptying the pit or making



a new pit. Making a new pit is not an option where the available land is limited and terrain is generally difficult. The same location should serve year after year. If anything is subsided, it should be with caution and carefully targeted to, for instance, high risk areas or poor settlements. More sanitation options should be explored, both from technical point of view and financial mechanism point of view.

Sanitation is a governance issue, whether dry or not dry. Sanitation is about dignity, convenience, public health, clean water and healthy environment, and general well-being of the citizens, all of which are issues and concerns for local governance. Sanitation should be prioritised as a critical need worth the effort. Since full sanitation coverage should be the target, local governments as local planners should take active role in this. Now that Nepal is stepping into a new era, let's hope that sanitation remains in the agenda and the forthcoming new local governments will be able to take active role in sustainable water and environmental sanitation development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Financial support from Academy of Finland (210816) is gratefully acknowledged, this case study being part of the study on "Governance of water and environmental services in long-term perspectives" (GOWLOP). I further wish to thank my Nepali colleagues in the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Support Programme Phase III, and the consultant for the programme, Plancenter Ltd, as well as my research team CADWES at Tampere University of Technology, Finland, for continued support, inspiration and encouragement.

REFERENCES

Nepal Human Development Report 2001 – Poverty Reduction and Governance. United Nations Development Programme, Nepal, Kathmandu. 128p. 2002.

<http://www.undp.org.np>

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Support Programme Phase III. Completion Report, Final Draft 2004.

Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Support Programme Phase III. Un-published monitoring and workshop data from 2003-2004.