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THE WASH SUMMIT

BEYOND TOILETS AND BEHAVIOUR CHANGE

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The WASH Summit

Beyond Toilets And Behaviour Change

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A WASH summit ~ WASH stands for water, sanitation and hygiene ~ is being organised by the Government of India in Delhi from 16 to 18 February. This is meant to reflect on the Swacch Bharat Mission (SBM) launched recently and to examine what it can and should achieve in the next five years.

This is an exciting time for anyone concerned with sanitation since SBM has given sanitation the status of a political priority for the Government. Indeed, since the launch of SBM in October 2014, cleanliness has started featuring much more regularly in the media. Cleanliness provides a way to force people to reflect on the link between solid and liquid waste, and sanitation and water, thereby broadening the framework within which sanitation is conceived.

The potential and limits of SBM can be best identified by comparing the framework for rural sanitation since this updates an existing programme, the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA). On the whole, the Guidelines for SBM (Gramin) are conceptually similar to the NBA Guidelines of 2012. This allows for continuity but fails to address the shortcomings of the earlier policy framework. This is unfortunate because experience with the NBA and before that, the Total Sanitation Campaign, calls for further thinking on the manner in which the fundamental right to sanitation is realised in rural areas.

Swacch Bharat Mission (SBM) needs to be recast so that its main focus becomes the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation repeatedly recognised by the higher judiciary

The WASH Summit should consider the previous experience with the implementation of NBA, which was largely focused on providing 'incentives' to build individual toilets and on ensuring behaviour change that would lead people to 'demand' toilets and use them once built. SBM (Gramin) does not deviate from this focus and in fact strengthens it by increasing the incentive amount. The focus thus remains on the provision of infrastructure and individual motivation. This strategy needs further thinking for several reasons:

First, the main emphasis of the rural sanitation campaign since 1999 has been on building individual toilets and motivating individuals to build and use them. This overlooks the fact that sanitation cannot be reduced to the elimination of open defecation. If open defecation is harmful to human health, individual toilets can only be an effective solution if they are accompanied by investments in management of the resulting human waste. Two-pit structures that do not leak contaminated water into the ground and ensure that no one handles human excreta (the practice of manual scavenging) can be constructed. However, this is not the design adopted in all cases and is unlikely to be adopted universally for cost and cultural reasons. We need to move beyond the focus on individual toilets towards strategies that integrate toilets within a broader paradigm that addresses the link between the use of water, production of wastewater and waterborne diseases linked to sanitation. Indeed, from the rights' perspective, what we should be concerned with is a right to sanitation, not a right to pee and/or defecate.

Second, the focus on individual toilets is premised on the existence of homogenous households where all individuals have similar access to the infrastructure and they benefit equally from it. Interestingly, in the state of Rajasthan, the honour of the village and the family has been the centrepiece of the strategy to eliminate open defecation. This is based on the premise that open defecation by womenfolk debases the village/family. The rationale for toilet construction has thus been that it will protect women from the dangers associated with open defecation (including sexual aggression) and that women will not have to wait for the cover of darkness to answer the call of nature. At the same time, there has been little recognition that toilets meant to primarily serve women may be built in areas of the household compound used mostly by men. The thinking about sanitation thus needs to be broader. Ending open defecation results in various beneficial effects, but it does not necessarily foster the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation of all. In fact, it may lead to unwelcome consequences, such as further confining women in their own homes.

Third, sanitation must be understood much more clearly as something that impacts the private and public spheres. In this context, the specific emphasis of the SBM (urban) guidelines on community and public toilets as part of the overall conception of sanitation is welcome. In rural areas, the provision of community toilets has existed for a number of years but it has not been implemented, mostly because there is no provision for maintenance. A lot more attention needs to be given to community toilets if they are to make a real contribution to the realisation of the right to sanitation.

Fourth, there is need to emphasise the labour component of sanitation. The emphasis on 'behaviour change' is necessary but must be accompanied by investment in the people running the system. Thus, despite the emphasis put on sanitation, particularly since the launch of the NBA in 2012, there are still too few people within the local and district administration whose work focuses on sanitation. Further, there is a significant need for more people charged with maintaining the sanitation infrastructure, such as school toilets and public toilets. In this respect, SBM does not make any particular commitments towards strengthening the workforce that can make the mission a success in the short run and the long run. This requires attention not only in terms of strengthening capacity but also ensuring that the creation of additional workforce does not result in the reproduction of patterns of discrimination that are slowly on the way towards being eliminated (such as the practice of manual scavenging).

Fifth, the link between sanitation and water pollution remains largely unaddressed. It is in fact more visible now since the urban sanitation guidelines are exclusively focused on solid waste management. Black water (what comes out of toilets) is not the only form of household water pollution but it will remain largely mixed with grey water (other household wastewater) for many years to come. The treatment and disposal of wastewater must thus be addressed comprehensively, as illustrated in the case of a city like Delhi, whose sewage is mostly dumped untreated into a river whose flow has been decreasing over time. A more direct link must be made in law and policy between water pollution (understood as an environmental issue) and sewage (understood as a sanitation issue). There will probably be significant resistance to this, as it will involve massive investments. However, this is essential in order to reach the goal of Swachh Bharat, as all the effort towards construction of individual toilets will eventually come to nothing in environmental and health terms if the broader issues are not addressed. This 'convergence' is a must if interventions are to make a difference in practice and it must involve both health and environmental aspects, which are mentioned in SBM but not comprehensively integrated. This is all the more crucial in a context where there seems to be a push towards weakening, rather than strengthening, environmental standards in place, as feared by many in the wake of the November 2014 report of the High Level Committee to review environmental legislation. The convergence needed is thus one that strengthens all the relevant frameworks simultaneously.

Sixth, there is a lot of emphasis on the fact that individuals must 'demand' toilets so as to create a sense of ownership. This is the reason why the financial assistance provided is termed an 'incentive' rather than a 'subsidy'. Yet, some criticise this payment as a waste of resources and argue that once villagers are 'motivated', they will find the resources to build a toilet. It is also sometimes argued that the incentive is actually sufficient to build 'a' toilet. At the same time, villagers have repeatedly highlighted the impossibility of building a fully functional latrine with the incentive money and the absence of additional resources to make up the shortfall. This partly explains the number of toilets used as storage spaces and the number of half-built structures that cannot really be put to any use. The problem is that the majority of rural households do not possess the necessary resources to invest in the kind of toilets that will not only make them end open defecation but that are also safe (in terms of concerns relating to leaching) and appropriate (in terms of no handling of excreta). Both the past and present government have shown that they are willing to make substantial investments to ensure the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation. This is positive but resources need to be spent in a way that considers not only the narrow goal of ending open defecation but also all allied issues.

On the whole, SBM needs to be recast so that its main focus becomes the realisation of the fundamental right to sanitation repeatedly recognised by the higher judiciary. This reframing will provide the basis for building a much stronger policy framework recognising all sanitation-related entitlements. The forthcoming WASH summit provides an excellent platform to initiate this discussion.

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