

The Swachh marathon

The momentum and scale of the Swachh Bharat Mission-Gramin (SBM-G) is unprecedented. Since the launch of the programme by the prime minister in October 2014, there has been an astonishing acceleration in the construction of toilets, with five crore built in three years. The scale and complexity facing the SBM-G make it, we believe, more challenging than any other rural development programme in the world. Driven forward with impressive leadership and dynamism, shortcomings are inevitable and rapid learning and adjustments vital and imperative for sustainable success.

With this in mind, a day-long meeting on October 10 in Delhi of representatives of government, international agencies, NGOs, consultants and researchers shared findings and lessons from methods for rapid learning relevant for the SBM-G. This led to ideas about how to tackle concerns that had come to light. Three burning issues stood out: Technical realities and what people know; their beliefs and behaviour; and unfinished business, especially concerning those who are poorer, marginalised and left behind.

The preference for septic tanks remains deeply rooted and widespread. People believe they are better than the recommended more sustainable and economic twin pits because they are big and will take longer to fill, and, used sparingly, may even never have to be emptied. Due to widespread ignorance of technical details, many septic tanks are not built according to the guidelines, and end up contaminating the environment and damaging public health.

Twin leach pits have much in their favour. For a few years, human waste flows to the first pit. Once full, it is left to become manure while new waste is diverted into a second pit. The first pit is emptied and the cycle starts again. This technology allows time for the waste to compost and become harmless, odourless and valuable fertiliser. However, rapid investigations found many people who had had twin pits constructed for them without any explanation of how they work. They lacked a sense of ownership and believed the pits would fill up fast. In consequence, they were using them only some of the time, continuing open defecation (OD) even in villages with 100 per cent toilet coverage.

This problem is acutely urgent. A recent rapid survey covering over a thousand households found that the proportion of twin pits being built in SBM is declining, and more and more unsustainable single leach pits are being built, especially among Scheduled Castes and Tribes.

The solution is to empower people through knowledge. Few rural people are aware of technical details or convinced by the advantages of twin pits. Mason training can help, but the major thrust needed is a massive communication campaign to inform all villagers of the technical options and details, what they are entitled to demand in quality and quantity of materials, and how to ensure masons do a full job, so that they are never be short-changed with single pits or substandard construction.

Partial usage of toilets, when some household members continue to defecate in the open, was confirmed to be widespread. In addition to fear of pits filling up, water availability was a major factor, both in drier areas and elsewhere. Gender plays a part too: Women are the main fetchers of water and cleaners of toilets. One flush of a toilet takes many times more water than does the lota for cleansing when defecating in the open.

Men are the main open defecators. There can be a macho element, a preference for the open air, and an element of chivalry. This is reinforced by conventional campaigns which stress women's dignity and needs: Men are considerate if they leave the toilets to women, so also minimising

water use and the rate at which the pit will fill.

One rapid study discovered effective ways of changing men's behaviour — groups of older women influencing men to adopt toilets when they go for OD. The study suggests that similar gentle and positive approaches should be promoted.

One rapid review confirmed that for health and nutrition benefits the proportion of coverage and use remain important. SBM-G verifications and several studies indicate that in practice 70-90 per cent coverage is often taken as acceptable for a declaration of open defecation free (ODF). There is no definite evidence on thresholds for coverage and use, but health benefits and nutrition indicators might rise more steeply as usage approaches 100 per cent. Furthermore, there are many benefits of total toilet use beyond health.

Moreover, those in the remaining 10-30 per cent without toilets are predominantly the marginalised and disadvantaged — OBC, SC, ST, the very poor, sick, disabled, aged and weak, or living in difficult or remote areas. For them, additional efforts and special policies and provisions are needed.

Declaration and verification of ODF is a milestone. Beyond ODF lie many challenges — children's poo, handwashing, rural faecal sludge management, solid and liquid waste management, and toilets that need upgrading, to name but a few. Rapid learning, sharing and adapting will be vital not just in the next two years but far beyond 2019. There is no last mile. The scale of the achievements and milestones passed over the past three years far surpass anything we believed conceivably possible. The rapid learning and reviews in the October 11 meeting confirmed that achieving a fully Swachh Bharat is not a sprint but a marathon, and that rapid learning, if acted on effectively, should speed progress and enhance sustainability.

END

Downloaded from crackIAS.com

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com