

High incidence of open defecation in Ghana

More than four million people in Ghana defecate in the bush, open drains, water bodies, or fields instead of using a latrine.

According to the Ghana Statistical Service Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) Report for 2006, open defecation is prevalent in all the ten regions. While the national average, according to the report, is 24%, the practice is most widespread in the Upper East Region with about 82% of the people without any form of latrine, followed by the Upper West Region with about 79% and then the Northern Region with about 73%.

Contributing factors

A couple of factors contribute to this negative practice; these include absence of clean household or public latrines and ignorance of the harmful effects of open defecation. It is also a fact in Ghana, that some people simply prefer the bush, the beach, or any open field for the simple reason that those places are more airy and convenient. There are others who do not want to add their shit to those of others in one pit for several superstitious and cultural reasons. Non enforcement of environmental laws is also a major factor.

Harmful effects

Human faeces left in the open fields, bushes or drains generate millions of viruses, bacteria and parasites. Houseflies usually fly between these faeces and the food we eat including fruits. And when we eat these contaminated foods, we have inadvertently eaten our own or other people's faeces! We therefore open ourselves up for illnesses that can even lead to deaths.

Rains also wash away most human faeces left in the open into rivers, ponds, open wells, lagoons and beaches. According to the Ghana Statistical Service (MICS 2006 report), about 19% of the population (nearly 4.2m people) still rely on untreated water from streams, dams, ponds, rivers and open wells for drinking and cooking. They may therefore have been drinking their own or other people's faeces and injecting themselves with germs and diseases.

Can the practice be stopped?

The answer is yes given the fact that it has been possible in some countries where certain organizations and the government focused on ending the practice. Even in some communities in the Afram Plains of Ghana it has been possible for some communities to stop open defecation thanks to interventions by the Afram Plains Development Organization. Below are excerpts from an article taken from the Global Education Website and we quote:

“Traditionally, in Bangladeshi villages when people wanted to go to the toilet they went behind bushes, in fields, ponds or on riversides. It was considered acceptable for men to defecate in the open anytime, but women could only relieve themselves in the early morning or after dark without embarrassment. Children could go anywhere as their wastes were considered harmless! ...

Since 2000, Village Education Resource Centre and WaterAid Bangladesh have been helping to make big changes in toileting habits through a Community-Led Total Sanitation program. In the program, facilitators would walk around the village with community members, introducing

them to the health and environmental dangers of fields being used as toilets. They visited regular toileting sites and broke down social taboos by talking openly about faeces, or 'poo'. There was usually plenty of laughter. Together, they drew diagrams showing that after rain faeces could flow from open sites into ponds, canals and wells, and eventually onto cooking utensils after washing, as well as onto food itself through flies. With shame and disgust they realized that they had probably been regularly eating their own – and other people's – faeces.

After one such introduction the villagers of Mosmoil in northern Bangladesh quickly decided to adopt 100% sanitation. It was time, they said, to end the age-old practice of open defecation. They learnt how to make a latrine which confined excreta and prevented faeces contaminating surrounding areas. Within a short time every household in the village had such a sanitary latrine. Villagers pledged to always use their latrines instead of going to the toilet in open areas and to wash their hands straight afterwards...

At school children learnt about washing hands and the need for all people to use the latrines. They took action with a public shaming campaign. They kept watch, and used flags naming the adults who were still going to the toilet in public areas to embarrass them and encourage them to change their toileting habits...

In 2004, the Government of Bangladesh earmarked 20 per cent of the annual development budget to promote sanitation awareness. In three years the sanitation coverage in Bangladesh surged from 33 per cent of households to over 70 per cent."

Conclusion

These are some of the efforts that have made Bangladesh a global showpiece for sanitation and the country is indeed cited at almost every sanitation conference and in almost every sanitation related article in recent years.

This is just an example of the fact that open defecation-free Ghana is possible. There are other ways through which the practice can be stopped; enforcement of building codes, which according to Local Government Authorities, include a household toilet, enforcement of environmental sanitation laws which prohibit open defecation, intensified public sensitization and openness in communicating open defecation matters, and of course, increased central, local government and traditional authority interest in the issue.

Citizens should also understand that when we defecate in the open, we eat it back and create a health risk for ourselves. Visitors to the country also laugh at us when they see us dotted along the drains and in the parks defecating.

Source: *Water and Sanitation Sector Monitoring Platform (WSMP) Ghana, August 2008*