

Shared latrine facilities – safe or unsafe?

Ghanaian institutions believe that about 61% of the people have access to improved latrine facilities. However, international reports especially coming from the UNICEF/WHO Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) say it is only ten percent of the people.

The authors of this article have noticed that the disparity is just an issue with definition of improved latrine facilities as against the credibility of any report.

The JMP, the UN designated team to monitor and report on progress towards achieving the water and sanitation targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), defines an improved latrine facility as one that hygienically separates human excreta from human contact. To allow for international comparability of estimates, the JMP considers only the following as improved latrine facilities; flush or pour flush into septic tanks, into pits, or into piped sewerage systems, Ventilated Improved Pit latrines, composting toilet and pit latrines with slab. Any other type of latrine, including shared latrines, is considered unimproved. Note that JMP considers only users of 'improved' latrine facilities as having 'access' to latrines.

Ghana's international ranking

A recent JMP report, "A Snapshot of Sanitation in Africa," produced for the AfricaSan+5 International Conference on Sanitation held in Durban, South Africa in February 2008, indicates that only ten percent of Ghanaians had access to improved latrine facilities as at 2006, a situation that places Ghana, in terms of performance, 48th out of 51 African countries and 14th out of 15 West African countries assessed in the report.

Doubts over the figures

Many sanitation sector practitioners have expressed doubts over the credibility of the figures, while others rather feel confused especially as some local institutions rather have higher figures for access to improved latrine facilities in Ghana. But the JMP indicates in the report that the estimates originate from data collected by national statistics offices along with other relevant institutions through national censuses and nationally representative household surveys. This therefore gives an indication that some or all of the data the JMP used may have originated from the Ghana Statistical Service. But the confusion seems to have deepened after the Ghana Statistical Service recently launched the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) 2006 report in Accra. The MICS report indicates that access to improved latrine facilities as at 2006 was 60.7%.

Shared facilities – cause of confusion!

A careful study of the report reveals that JMP's adherence to the application of international standards in computing the figures is the cause of the controversy. The JMP clearly separates shared latrine facilities from the improved ones. According to the report, shared facilities alone represent 51% in terms of access to latrines in Ghana! Meanwhile the 2006 MICS report did not separate shared facilities from private facilities.

In defense of shared toilet facilities

Some authorities in the sanitation sector, however, contend that it is too harsh to declare every type of shared facility unimproved or unsafe. They claim that several shared facilities are clean enough to be counted as safe. "There are a number of public water closets managed by full time attendants who always ensure that the place is kept clean and to say these facilities are

unimproved is not fair,” an official from the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment said in a chat over the issue. According to the official, in some rural communities too, the lack of space compels a couple of households to build a neighbourhood latrine and share the squat holes with walls separating them into two or three chambers. This means that each of such chambers is managed by a household and to declare them unimproved rather compounds the efforts at promoting safe latrines in such communities.

But the statement below, quoted from the JMP report 2006 – “*Meeting the MDG Drinking water and sanitation target, the urban and rural challenge of the decade,*” summarizes the position taken by the JMP towards shared facilities:

“With increasing urbanization, growing concentrations of people with very low incomes, and greater numbers of tenants and informal settlements, it is likely that more and more urban dwellers will rely on public or shared facilities. Although JMP recognizes that well-maintained public or shared facilities represent an improvement over rudimentary forms of sanitation, the likelihood of poor hygiene and unsustainable use of these facilities, especially by children and women, argues against counting them as improved facilities.”

Counting the cost

Ghana has made enormous investments in public latrines. There are thousands of public latrines in both rural and urban communities. Government and several NGOs and CBOs have provided communities with expensive Kumasi Ventilated Improved Pit (KVIP) latrines believed to be an improved latrine technology to communities mostly without household latrines. To declare all these facilities unimproved by Ghana would imply additional financial resources to either provide or promote private latrines. And even if this is done it would still not be practicable in hundreds of Ghanaian communities due to lack of space.

On the other hand if Ghana should still count shared facilities as improved, it would stand out as an island within the global system as the JMP definition would still describe the country as poorly sanitized compared to other countries.

The sector must decide now!

Though the seclusion of shared latrines from safe or improved facilities may be harsh, according to the report there are 47 African countries who have done better than Ghana applying the same definition of which 13 are in West Africa. The sanitation sector as a whole, led by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Environment, should debate this issue as soon as possible. Discussions may focus on this question; “***Would Ghana still count shared latrine facilities as improved or rather decide to put up a strong argument to advocate for a change in the global definition to accommodate shared but clean facilities?***” This will help the Environmental Health and Sanitation Directorate to do a more effective analysis of the on-going nationwide baseline sanitation data collection before another ‘data bomb’ explodes.

Source: Water and Sanitation Sector Monitoring Platform (WSMP) Ghana, July 2008.