



OPINION PIECE

Billions around the world live without proper flushing toilets

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As the world celebrates the World Toilet Day today (Sunday), An estimated 4,2 billion people the in 10 countries are said to be without proper flushing toilets, an indication that just about 60 percent of the earth's population is running the risk of being exposed to a myriad of water-borne diseases such as diarrhea, dysentery and typhoid.

A report by WaterAid, a leading international water NGO, reveal that India has the highest number (157 million) of urban dwellers who do not have access to safe and private toilets. This can only mean that one of the world's most populous countries is sitting on a health time bomb unless the government takes urgent measures to address the problem.

The report lists nine other countries - China, Indonesia, Russia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Brazil and Ethiopia – as those that lack proper ablution facilities and are at great risk of water-borne epidemics. With more people than ever before migrating to cities, finding a toilet is not only a chore but a public health issue for hundreds of millions of people around the world.

WaterAid estimates that 600 million people the world over use dirty or crowded communal toilets and pit or bucket latrines, while some 100 million don't have facilities at all. The line of people who lack access to decent toilets stretches around the world 29 times. Even though the flushing toilet problem can be addressed through other modern technologies such as chemicals, the availability of water is intrinsically linked to ablution.

According to the Asian Development Bank, Pakistan is one of the most water-scarce countries in the world, and it is teetering on being classified 'water-stressed'. As water demand exceeds supply in the populous South Asian country, more and more water is being withdrawn from the nation's reservoirs, leaving them in a critically precarious position. The ADB report adds that Pakistan's storage capacity, the amount of water it has on reserve in case of an emergency, is limited to a 30 day supply, far below 1,000 days for countries with similar climates. Without meaningful action, a water crisis could plunge the country into further chaos.

The two scenarios give credence to a largely ignored warning by world bodies such as the World Bank and scientists that the third world war is very likely to be over water unless countries upped their ante in water conservation and ablution facilities.

China, the world's most populous country, is building toilets faster than the demand created by new urban arrivals who have zoomed to 329 million since 17 years ago.

It is against this background that 193 UN-affiliated countries last year adopted the global development goal to ensure sanitation for all by 2030. The problem of refugees migrating to other countries has added to the poor toilet facility problem as host countries scramble to find a solution.

South Africa is fast grappling with its toilet problems as it makes strides in eradicating the obnoxious bucket system that inherited from apartheid. The post-1994 government inherited a legacy of 20 million people who lived in four million houses and did not have access to proper



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toilets. These were almost exclusively black rural communities who were left to their own devices to resort to innovation. This led to the mushrooming of pit-latrines that were a health hazard. Most black urban townships such as Alexandra in Johannesburg used the bucket system that was managed half-heartedly by the peri-urban municipality. Consequently, the infant mortality rate rose alarmingly as children were often exposed to unhygienic conditions.

In her 2017/18 Budget Vote speech, the Minister of Water and Sanitation, Nomvula Mokonyane said the restoration of the dignity of our people was a commitment by the government.

Of the 52 300 buckets in the formal settlements that were to be eradicated, some 26 900 buckets had been dealt with and of the remaining 25 400, 14 000, was work in progress. The 11 000 remaining would be completed through alternative sanitation solutions in partnership with the Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and the Water Research Commission (WRC). Mokonyane cited Mpumalanga, Gauteng, KwaZulu-Natal, Limpopo and the Northern Cape as provinces that no longer had buckets in the formal areas.

According to sanitation specialists in the Department of Water and Sanitation, the government has made serious strides in addressing toilet challenges since 23 years ago.

“The reason why it would appear that we are not achieving our millenium and developmental goals is because unlike 20 years ago, South Africa has smaller families of three to four people and that raises the demand for toilets. In the past a typical household had no fewer than 15 members of one household sharing one toilet,” says a specialist

Aggravating the shortage of toilets is the number of foreigners who have settled in South Africa. Even though some are here legally and have been granted asylum, the government does not build them houses and they end up being crammed in city buildings, thereby putting a strain on ablution facilities.

The problem of urbanisation has led to unprecedented population explosion in the cities and people seeking greener pastures have resorted to land grabbing to establish informal settlements. This has created all sorts of headaches for the government and metro councils that have to find alternative accommodation for the illegal dwellers.

The second biggest problem for municipalities is the glaring absence of public toilets in towns and city centres. The few that are available are filthy due to poor maintenance by the authorities. What with the spiralling crime of drug abuse and the uncontrollable prostitution by sex workers who need to earn a living or to quench their drug pang. Most taxi ranks in big cities have become havens of petty crime with pickpocketing and handbag snatching on the rise.

Clearly, municipalities must devise some means of discouraging taximen who relieve themselves openly in taxi ranks even if toilets are provided nearby. This practice has become common in most taxi ranks with the police preferring to look the other way. Consequently, the forbidding urine stench has made it increasingly difficult to breath in these public places and potential passengers are resorting to alternative transport such as metro buses.



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It is incumbent upon us as citizens to appreciate our toilets by keeping them clean as they play an important role in our lives.

Themba Khumalo