

Beyond the outhouse

by D. Merrill Ewert

I STOOD uncertainly in front of an outhouse in West Africa, trying to figure out what was supposed to happen next.

A crowd of several hundred people waited expectantly behind me. I had just offered a prayer dedicating the facility and cut the ribbon across the entrance.

After a moment, I stepped inside but nobody followed. I stood there scratching my head. Was I supposed to inaugurate the outhouse, or simply admire it? I chose the latter.

Stepping back outside, I announced to the waiting audience that this new facility was indeed a fine piece of work. I moved aside as people crowded in to see it for themselves.

My colleague and I were guests of a community development agency that had arranged for us to help celebrate the completion of a local well and the dedication of the community outhouse. My colleague had made a short speech at the ceremony in honor of the new well

and I had been asked to dedicate the outhouse. Although somewhat dubious about a community toilet — having never seen one before in Africa — I assumed that project planners had done their homework.

The fly trap

That toilets contribute to good sanitation is a well-established principal of community health. When communities use them, it reduces the spread of intestinal parasites and certain infectious diseases.

The theory behind the VIP toilet (Ventilated Improved Pit) is quite simple. It is designed to be a small square structure usually built with sticks, mud and grass — with a door and a roof (but no windows) — resting on a cement slab over a six-

foot pit. A six-inch pipe running through the slab carries the smell from the pit and releases it into the air.

As the wind blows across the pipe (which is warmed by the sun), it creates a convection current flowing from the pit to the sky. When the outhouse is positioned so that the door faces in the direction of the prevailing winds, the air flows through the cracks into the structure, down the hole, and then up the pipe. Flies attracted to the pit by the smell generally fly in the direction of light. Since the outhouse is dark, the flies attempt to escape up the pipe (aided by the current) to the only sunlight they can see. When they reach the top of the pipe, however, they are stopped



It seemed simple enough:
build a community toilet for African villagers.
But someone didn't do their homework.



by a wire mesh, quickly die in the heat, and fall back into the pit. In this way, the outhouse instituted as a community health measure doubles as a fly trap.

The new design

The project's staff had borrowed the basic design from a nearby university but decided to improve upon it. The one-person model, perceived as too small and inefficient, was replaced by a larger structure with 12 holes. The unit was divided into two sections, one side for women and the other side for men. Each had six positions (holes), centered front-to-back. This meant that a dozen people (six men and six women) could use the outhouse at the same time, thereby reducing the time one might wait to use the

facility. Not having to wait, it was assumed, people would be more likely to use it instead of relieving themselves behind the bushes. Combining a men's toilet and a women's toilet into the same structure also resulted in additional savings in labor and materials.

Windows provided light in place of the usually dark interiors and the structure was positioned to maximize the sunlight. For aesthetic reasons, the builders ran the pipe up the inside wall rather than the outside. A less costly four-inch ventilation pipe was substituted for the recommended six-inch pipe.

These impressive new outhouses, perceived by project designers as a visual symbol of effective community health practice, were built in

several dozen villages. Since they were much more expensive than traditional stick and mud structures, the agency provided some of the building materials to the communities without charge and assigned a team of construction workers to do much of the work for the people.

An assessment

One year after this dedication, a team of outside evaluators visited the project and learned several interesting facts.

First, people in these communities took turns using the toilets rather than taking advantage of their multi-person capacity. This reflected both the desire for privacy as well as a very practical concern. People would generally use the position nearest the entrance. The outhouses were so narrow that the knees of anyone squatting over a hole would extend forward making it impossible for anyone else to move past the person to the next stall. Since it is considered inappropriate to walk behind people relieving themselves, only one

The new facility was a monument to agency arrogance. It did all the wrong things. No one wanted to use it.

person would use the facility at a time. Although each side was designed to be used simultaneously by six people, this large new facility functionally served one at a time.

The windows brightened the room so the flies could move freely between the pit and the open air. Instead of serving as a trap, the outhouse became a breeding ground for flies. The ventilation pipe running up the inside wall stayed cooler than it would have on the outside. This reduced the flow of air up the pipe and increased the smell, thereby attracting even more flies. It also reduced the ability of the flies to move up the pipe — not that they would want to — since they could already move freely in and out of the pit with the aid of light from the sun.

By facing the outhouse in the direction of the sun, the builders had inadvertently positioned it away from prevailing winds. This provided additional light for attracting flies and reduced the ventilation. It also increased the smell and made people less likely to use the facility and more likely to relieve themselves behind the bushes.

In short, the outhouse project was a complete failure.

Implications

This story suggests several important lessons for development workers:

1. Cultural sensitivity. Many development workers arrogantly assume they understand the problems and issues facing poor communities. With little regard for local customs, they construct monuments to their own lack of cultural sensitivity. Development workers who respect people begin by learn-

ing about the culture of their hosts. Outside interventions, however well-intentioned and innocuous, are almost always profoundly affected by cultural patterns that must be understood before desired changes can be successfully introduced.

2. Local participation. When people participate in designing and implementing programs that affect their own communities, it not only promotes local ownership over the process but reduces the number of white elephants created by outside experts. Development agencies that promote community participation can draw on indigenous knowledge and implement activities consistent with traditional cultural patterns. Communities that make their own decisions have a vested interest in designing activities that conform to local conditions.

3. Sustainability. Funding pressures sometimes lead organizations to create visible symbols of human progress constructed with bricks and mortar. These often appear outwardly impressive. It is much more difficult, however, to document the process through which local communities slowly and quietly solve their own problems. Projects that mobilize people to initiate their own activities are much more sustainable than those that do things for people.

4. Learning. Development workers who value form over substance sometimes invest more energy in building structures than in helping people learn new behavioral patterns. The world is full of unused toilets built by agencies with the goal of improving community health. That many of them remain

unused is a testimony to the people's lack of understanding of sanitation. Although outwardly impressive, this particular outhouse was under-utilized as a sanitation facility and was active in producing flies that spread disease throughout the community.

5. Humility. Activists seeking to remedy the world's ills often fail to recognize that they know less about possible solutions than they do about the problems. Things are seldom that simple. Solutions that make sense on the surface often overlook hidden nuances that affect the impact of proposed changes designed to improve local conditions. More humility might encourage development workers to move more carefully before assuming they understand the answers to community problems.

Beyond the outhouse

It is unlikely that I will ever dedicate another outhouse. If I do, it will probably be small, built of mud and sticks, and consistent with local customs. I hope that people will have built it themselves and understand how well-designed toilets can improve sanitation and hygiene, and reduce the number of flies in the community.

I also hope that someone will explain to me what I am supposed to do after I offer the prayer and cut the ribbon. m

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