

Quality and Sustainability in the SBM-G

This is an edited summary of the main points I made in my remarks at the opening and closing of the Workshop on Quality and Sustainability in the SBM-G held under the aegis of the Divisional Commissioner, Moradabad, in Moradabad 11-13 September 2017.

I am privileged to be able to work with you on the SBM-G. I have never before encountered problems as complex, messy, interlocked and intractable and at the same time so vital for solution as that which you are tackling - open defecation in rural north India.

The importance of ending open defecation and exposure to unhygienic conditions cannot be exaggerated. Comparative research has found that some two-thirds of undernutrition, measured as stunting, correlates with open defecation and population density when these are combined. No wonder that feeding programmes in densely populated rural North India, though needed and highly desirable, do not have more impact. Stunted children never grow to their full potential in height and mental development, spend less time in school and do less well there, earn less later, and suffer impaired immune systems. The hygienic behaviours and clean conditions you are working for would transform this. This is a mission indeed!

With 39 per cent of Indian children stunted, India ranks 97th out of 118 in the Global Hunger Index. With nearly 50 per cent of its children stunted, were UP a country, it would be bottom or very close to bottom in the world.

This underlines the immense importance of the SBM-G. The programme has no precedent. Never before has there been such a combination of scale, commitment and speed. Much is being achieved very fast. This is impressive and to be applauded. But it brings many risks and dangers.

There are many challenges. Successful rural sanitation programmes world-wide with CLTS have been based on no hardware subsidy. India's subsidy programme creates unique problems.

Major dangers are 1. Constructing toilets without collective behaviour change 2. Malpractices, low quality and inappropriate construction 3. Lack of ownership and partial usage of toilets, with some household members continuing OD. 4. Leaving out those least able and 5 Declarations of ODF to meet targets when the reality lags far behind.

The severity of these problems has been highlighted by recent research sponsored by WaterAid in 16 Districts in 8 States, including UP. This found 33 per cent of toilets sustainably safe, 35 per cent safe but needing major upgrades to be sustainable, and 31 carrying health hazards. Week-long immersions by 630 students of the IIM Indore in 157 ODF-declared villages in 13 Districts of Madhya Pradesh found only 24 were ODF.

On our field visit, we saw unsafe septic tanks. In the village I visited, we were told that some septic tanks were regularly flushed out every few days, and the effluent discharged into open drains and on to the village pond. The pond we saw was covered in flourishing green vegetation which was doing very well on the rich faecal fertiliser it was being fed. The Pradhan said that six years ago they were still bathing in the pond. No more, utterly no more. Now farmers were pumping the water out to fertilise their fields. And it would probably be much better for health to revert to OD than in effect to practice it just outside the dwelling, sharing it also with neighbours through the open drains running through the village.

The passion and energy highlighted in his remarks by the Divisional Commissioner, and the extent to which these have been manifest in this workshop and are reflected in the tremendous efforts of many champions, are a wonderful resource. To passion and energy let me add realism. Together these need to be channelled to ensuring quality, equity and sustainability, not just speed or declarations of ODF but in well constructed and hygienic toilets and behaviours of total usage that will last.

In this workshop we have been presented with examples of good practice: in use of the incentive for instance through compressed demand (and rejection of the incentive by some communities who decide to use their own resources); in providing support for those least able or needing special facilities, and those who need help in covering the last mile; in training and supervising masons; in

innovations in triggering...and much else has been shared informally. The campaign mode and many actions in the Districts provide a favourable environment far beyond anything that has gone before.

All the same, and vital though campaign mode is and the innovations and good practices that it has brought, there remain serious trade-offs between quality and speed. What is the optimal speed? In Madhya Pradesh one BDO failed to achieve his targets three times because he did not compromise on participation and quality before the declaration of ODF. As a result his Block is likely to be far more sustainably ODF than others. And he was rewarded for his honesty and achievements with promotion to a senior position in Bhopal. Far too often, though, quality of process and construction have been and are being compromised for speed in achieving targets. The question is whether targets can be transformed, turned on their heads.

The drive has often become to count coverage of toilets reported constructed with tight targets. Quality of process then tends to be neglected. In the reports back from our groups in this workshop the poor quality of CLTS triggering was mentioned no less than 5 times. Nothing else was brought up anything like as often. Much of the problem is that all too often CLTS is identified with triggering to the neglect of the vital stages of pre-triggering and immediate post-triggering follow up. And the quality of training of facilitators and of the triggering process are again and again reported to be poor.

We know from research and from common observation that the reporting of ODF targets achieved is exaggerated. On the other hand, verifications like those carried out in the Districts of this Division are much more credible. They have found many shortfalls. The choice that is faced for Districts and for the Government of UP is either to continue counting as ODF Blocks and Districts which are far from ODF, or to set an example to the rest of India by insisting on higher standards which means taking longer and in the shorter term appearing not to be doing as well as other Districts or States.

It is a question of legacy, to children, and to children yet unborn. Energy, enthusiasm and passion in implementing the SGMG are vital and to be celebrated. But to repeat, so is realism. Excessive chasing of construction targets where these mean lack of ownership, failure to change behaviour, and faulty

and inadequate construction will leave **a legacy of infection and stunted children who never realise their potential**. This may be through pathways such as malpractices in construction, defective substructures (as with so many septic tanks), and only partial usage.

Taking serious note of verifications, seeking to promote collective behaviour change, and achieving high quality construction, can still be done fast and well, but to be done well, needs reasonable time. The SBMG and all the great efforts put into it can then leave **a legacy of sustained ODF, healthier conditions, and children who grow to their full potential**.

To improve practices to this end requires rapid innovation, learning and sharing. This workshop has been an initiative in this spirit. Can you intensify, sustain and spread this in your 9 Districts? Can continuous innovation, learning and sharing be increasingly embedded in your practice?

And further, can this participatory sharing and learning workshop itself be not a one-off, but a seed for others? Can there be more such workshops in UP and elsewhere in India? Can those engaged with the SBMG in other Districts, Divisions and States be convened and facilitated to learn from each other and to spread and accelerate the adoption of good practices which together are transformative? And can this be a means for the SBMG to move faster and better towards a truly Swachh Bharat?

Robert Chambers drafted in Moradabad, completed on 20 September 2017