

November 17, 2009

Dear Editor,

THE WORLD TOILET DAY - LET'S TALK ABOUT SH!T

World Toilet Day, today (November 19), may pass unnoticed largely owing to lack of awareness of such a day. So, what is World Toilet Day for? It seeks to promote good toilet behavior and raise awareness on the effects of poor hygiene on people's health. This year's theme is '*health of your child begins in the toilet*'. It aims to raise awareness on the effects of faecal-oral contamination on children. This simply means how 'eating shit' can lead to contracting diarrhoeal diseases such as dysentery and cholera, and lead to death of children. It also contributes to absenteeism from school.

Over 2.6 billion of the world population do not have proper toilet facilities. Worse still, even those with proper toilet facilities do not wash their hands properly after shitting. In Kenya, about 20 million people do not have proper toilet facilities. They defecate in the open or in a *juala* (flying toilet). Over 85% of Kenyans do not properly wash their hands after shitting. The implication? Four out of every five people you shake hands with *today* will most likely leave some human *shit* in your hands!

As Kenyans, we worry a lot about where and how to get water, food, shelter and good health. However, when we do eat a meal, how many of us pause to think of where and how we shall dispose of it after it has gone through the digestive system? For a minority (VIPs, political elite, CEOs and the middle class), this is never an issue as toilets are readily available. They use a toilet and do not think of where the sh!t goes after the flush. Unfortunately, for many people in low income settlements - from Kibera in Nairobi, to Kondele in Kisumu or Majengo in Nanyuki, to Kisumu Ndogo in Mombasa - answering a simple call of nature is a big issue. It requires skill, trickery, proper timing and a good measure of luck. Slumlords rent houses without adequate toilet facilities and public authorities have either taken no action, or worse, been complicit in this injustice. Tenants have to settle for communal toilets that are few, often filthy, far apart and costly. A limited daily budget of less than Ksh.100 has to factor in Ksh.5 for every short call and Ksh.10 for a long call. Over and above the indignity of not having a private toilet, girls and women are exposed to sexual violence as they are forced to defecate before dawn or at night, for the semi-privacy that the dark affords.

But there is a section of Kenyans that aren't taking the shit anymore. Children! In villages such as Jaribuni Kilifi, children have vowed to name and shame through signposting names of those who persist in the practice at the defecation sites. And if some one is caught in the act? They resort to the whistle – quite literally.

Due the efforts of these children and their communities, today many villagers in Kilifi, Homa Bay, Kwale, Machakos and Kawangware will join others globally, to celebrate the attainment of Open Defecation Free (ODF) status as they mark the World Toilet Day. These communities symbolize genuine commitment and collective action to address local problems, using local resources without reliance on external help. This has been possible through Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS), which uses disgust and shame, to help communities link open defecation, to their health. This often triggers them to take action to ensure that nobody defecates in the open and that every one has appropriate toilet facilities. They all accept that nothing short of 100 per cent safe disposal of “*shit*” will do. Open Defecation Free Status is recognition that nobody defecates in the open, every household in the village has a latrine, uses it well and washes their hands well.

Adequate sanitary toilets and facilities that have previously been viewed as expensive, and beyond the reach of the *mwanaichi*, are now being erected by households with no subsidy from either government or NGOs. Locally available materials – mud, sticks and grass are used to revolutionize toilet construction and hand-washing utilizing ash. In Kilifi district, toilet coverage has increased from 300 to 6000 over a period of just 18 months. Across Kenya, there are over 200 villages that are already Open Defecation Free (ODF) since the introduction of Community Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) in July 2007. In Kilifi district alone, 15 additional villages will be celebrating attainment of open defecation free status.

Are these villages going to remain open defecation free? Ask the whistle-blowing children and youth!

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