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The business of sanitation: how partnership can plug the access gap

Despite efforts from the development community to provide wash facilities, it is the private sector that has the greatest reach. Time to flush away the silos?

Rich McEachran

Guardian Professional, Tuesday 25 March 2014 07.11 EDT

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Local people carry clean water in jerrycans from a clean water pipe in the Kibera slum in Nairobi, Kenya. Photograph: Anadolu Agency/Getty Images

The sanitation target is the most off-track of all the MDGs, with 80% of countries falling behind their national targets. About a third of the global population has no access to a toilet, and roughly the same number of people have to openly defecate. Even a toilet is no assurance of hygiene – thousands of children die from sanitation-related diseases, including diarrhoea, every day, mainly caused by lack of access to clean water.

International organisations like WaterAid have been effective in developing strategies to address sanitation, like creating local partnerships. Elsewhere, multinational companies have built communal wells and water pumps, but their enthusiasm and philanthropic desire hasn't necessarily equated to the needs of communities being met. Often where there's short-term involvement and lack of knowledge of development issues, there's no guarantee of long-term stability.

"The overwhelming majority of households today, who have access to on-site sanitation – a toilet or latrine in their home with some means of primary treatment like a septic pit – have such access through intervention by the private sector," says Jemima Sy, senior water and sanitation specialist at the World Bank's water and sanitation programme.

"There is no question that the development sector needs to see that this market-based model already works for the large majority, [and that it]

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offers an opportunity to expand the development dividends to poorer households who do not yet have such access," Sy says.

Previous successful projects have been led by the private sector, in collaboration with larger development organisations. But is the model – so often used – of an NGO financing a project, and a private contractor maintaining it, a sustainable one?

Last November, the Ghanaian NGO Training, Research and Network for Development was [granted €1m](#) by the [African Water Facility](#) to support a [waste](#) treatment plant that will recycle fecal matter into bio-fertiliser. The project will also provide 125,000 people with sanitation services.

With the future of large-scale projects dependant on big money, there are plenty of ifs, buts and maybes. The situation is complicated by the fact that sanitation isn't a selling point for all investors. Is this where smaller NGOs could play a role, through collaborating with start-ups and entrepreneurs? Could they help communities and leverage local markets? Would this be more beneficial?

"Businesses could be much better at delivering aspirational and affordable products," says Sy. She warns that as long as governments or development programmes are seen as the buyer, and not the poor, products will struggle to reach the market.

Small NGOs can help their value be realised. They are more likely to be less bureaucratic, have more experience of work on the ground and have funds granted, or donated, from supporters who share the same passion. A group of like-minded experts with knowledge of technology and development professionals, that come together to collaborate, are also more likely to understand the aesthetics that come attached with needing and having a toilet. As Sy puts it: "How it makes them feel and how it positions them in society."

The Swedish-based [Peepoople](#), who developed the Peepoo bag – "a personal, single-use, self-sanitising, fully biodegradable toilet" – is one example of the role small NGOs can play in the business of sanitation being understood. Peepoople [addresses aesthetic issues](#) by allowing women to go to toilet in the decency of their own homes, so they don't have to use public sanitation services.

"Peepoople AB, the producer of Peepoo is a limited company, but Peepoople Kenya, that imports and distributes [the bags], is a Kenyan NGO," explains its founder, Anders Wilhelmson. "Business is in every part [of what we do]. Not only at Peepoople and its suppliers, but more importantly in the context and environment the toilet is used in."

Wilhelmson says the model "acts as a catalyst for economic growth" and can leverage local markets. Women become micro-entrepreneuers by selling bags on behalf of the NGO; customers receive a refund for each used bag that is returned; and the Peepoo solution collected in the bags is sold to farmers as cheap fertiliser.

While it may not totally resolve problems like privacy or handwashing – and one innovation alone can't attend all health concerns – giving locals a financial incentive, and something to buy into, means the NGO is in a better position to educate them on the importance of good hygiene and to address the taboos around sanitation.

Collaborating with the private sector is essential. A marker of how successful an NGO's involvement is, is not the amount of funding behind a product or project, but how the poor are valued as consumers (and not charity). Seeing sanitation as a business, as well as an environmental, health and social issue, can push NGOs to give water, sanitation and hygiene (Wash) a higher priority in policies.

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