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Community education and participation in the Maldives

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1. Introduction

The purpose of an evaluation is usually two-fold. The first is a thorough analysis of the project as it exists and second is the making of recommendations for the future. Often the study of a project is strong but the recommendations are general, weak and often unrealistic.

For an evaluation to be useful, the entire evaluation exercise from the planning to the field work must keep the aim of making specific recommendations to the forefront. In projects dealing with toilets, for example, if the existing designs are socially unacceptable, an evaluation should make specific recommendations for changes in the design or opt for new designs. However, if this is done in isolation by the evaluator after the field work, it may only prolong the trial and error process of deriving designs that are acceptable to the users.

The argument of this paper is that even conventional evaluations can be made more meaningful if they make specific, detailed recommendations that have been discussed and approved by the users. This can be done by incorporating some elements of community education and participation in the research process. The focus of this paper is on use of group meetings and models of toilets, to ensure community education and participation in finalising recommendations for future toilet designs. This process, it is believed, will result in toilet designs that are acceptable technically and socially, thus increasing the probability of success. For illustrative purposes experience is drawn from a recent study of community and private toilets in the Maldives.

2. Water and Sanitation in Maldives

The Republic of Maldives consists of over 1200 small coral islands of which 202 are inhabited. The primary source of drinking water is a thin shallow fresh water lens floating on sea water within the confines of the island. The proximity of the water lens to the surface and the porosity of the soil leads to contamination of the groundwater. Safe drinking water is obtained through public

wells that are kept chlorinated at mosques, and through public rainwater tanks that are increasingly being built.

The traditional and still the most common method of human waste disposal is defecation on the beach. However in crowded islands with little or no beach space left, inappropriate disposal of human waste has become a major health hazard. In an environment of limited financial resources, the Government of Maldives with the assistance of UNICEF and UNCDF undertook the provision of community toilets built on the beach in crowded islands.

The toilets are built in a block of five cubicles facing inward, towards the island. They are of the pour-flush variety with water for cleaning and flushing being provided through a well located in a compound outside the block. The waste is discharged through sewers directly into the sea. The project was supposed to have been implemented utilising a community education and participation approach.

Informal observations made by government officials made it clear that the community toilets were plagued by a host of problems resulting in low use. In 1984, the Ministry of Health through the UNDP IDWSS Decade Advisory Services Project executed by WHO, SEARO, undertook an evaluation of the toilets in the atolls. The aim of the evaluation was to enable the decision-makers within the government to:

- 1) fully understand the attitudes of villagers towards the use of public and private toilets;
- 2) consider a range of alternatives for the implementation of public and private toilet programmes; and
- 3) make decisions regarding future toilet programmes based upon guidelines provided in the report.

3. Evaluation Methodology

No single methodology can obtain information on attitudes while at the same time evaluating the design and use of a technology. Hence a combination of 6 methods of data collection were used. They were:

- 1) interview with 228 adults using a questionnaire;
- 2) interviews with key informants;
- 3) observation of toilets for use and rating of physical conditions of toilets;

- 4) informal household visits and meetings with ad hoc groups;
- 5) group meetings with committees; and
- 6) use of models of toilets with interchangeable parts in group meetings.

In all the islands, group meetings were conducted after completion of household

interviews, interviews with key informants, observation of the community toilets for use and rating of the physical conditions of the toilets. The information gathered prior to group meetings through the above techniques was useful in assessing the existing problems with the project and in providing the social cultural context within which the community toilets had to function. They also provided data on the social, cultural, organisational, personnel and financial constraints within which the old and any new designs would have to function. Although the questionnaires and interviews yielded some indirect information on design problems, they did not yield any detailed information on modifications needed in the existing toilets and possible options for the future.

It was here, to make the transition from data on attitudes and general statements of problems related to design, to specific alternative toilet types, that the use of group meetings and models of toilets became crucial.

However, for group meetings to yield meaningful information, careful attention needs to be paid to four factors:

- 1) the composition of the group;
- 2) type of information desired;
- 3) structure or format of the group; and
- 4) communication aids.

Equally important is the interaction between these factors.

1. Composition of the group. Any information gathered is a reflection of the opinions and ideas of the people interviewed. In any project that requires community participation and aims to include the disadvantaged, it is imperative that information be gathered from a cross-section of the population. Meetings with existing groups is an efficient way of gathering information. The problem is that most traditional and government initiated groups are powerful but tend to represent the elite to varying degrees.

An additional complication is that often governments require both private and government initiated development efforts to work through the existing power structure. If one is required to work through the existing power structure, what strategies can be used to involve groups, gain their approval and support and yet get information from the not so powerful?

In Maldives, every island has one or more Island Chiefs assisted by Assistant Island Chiefs and the Island Development Committee (IDC). The IDC consists of some nominated and some elected members, almost exclusively

men. It assists the Island Chief in planning and implementing development activities for the community. Each island, in addition, has a Women's Committee that is less powerful and active than the IDC. Additional groups found in some islands are fishermen's clubs, youth clubs, garden groups and educational groups. Several factors pointed to the need to schedule meetings with the IDC.

In Maldives for a project depending on community education and participation it is essential to have the support of the Island Chief and the Island Development Committee, since they are the planners and implementors. Secondly the IDC was supposed to have implemented the community toilet programme. Finally, since the focus was on toilets, and even most members of the IDC did not have individual toilets at home, they were also potential users.

However, it is undeniable that the committees represent the more powerful. Additionally, since they are essentially political structures, in any discussion political considerations can come into play. Further, the Island Chief is a member of the IDC and hence, present at all their meetings. His presence obviously affects group dynamics.

Four strategies were adopted to get meaningful information from the committee meetings and yet ensure wider representation of the people in the island.

- a) Meetings were held with the Women's Committee so as to take into account opinions of both men and women. This was important because the Women's Committee had not been consulted at any point in the project even though in most islands toilets had been built exclusively for women.
- b) Unscheduled meetings were held with ad hoc groups of men and women near the community toilets, near traditional private toilets and outside people's homes.
- c) Information was gathered utilising an open-ended questionnaire from men and women from randomly selected households.
- d) The Island Chiefs were not present at the Committee meetings. 'Key informant' interviews were done with the Island Chiefs prior to the Committee meetings. The first interview focused on an overview of the island, and the second on details of the community toilet programme. By the end of these meetings not only had valuable information been obtained but rapport and trust had been established. All the Island Chiefs then agreed that their presence at the meeting would inhibit a forthright exchange. However, they all came to introduce the evaluator to the Committee and then left.

2. Content of the meeting. Whether or not the dominant members have been eliminated, careful thought has to be given to the content or purpose of the meeting. Group meetings cannot be used to obtain information on aspects of the problem that will divide the group and bring into play factional interests.

In the Maldives study, the purpose of the meeting was stated as trying to understand how the community toilet project had been implemented. It was emphasised that the purpose was to understand the process and not to find 'scapegoats'. The focus was on factual information, on design preferences and alternative designs for the future. For example, the question of location of facilities was avoided because it would have introduced divisive elements. Questions that would have produced socially desirable answers were also avoided completely.

3. Format of the meeting. What actually happens at a meeting, although influenced by the group composition and purpose of the meeting, depends also on the format or structure of the meeting. In a meeting which aims at wide participation by the members and education of both sides, it is important to create an environment in which a dialogue is generated. In such an environment both sides actively listen and respond to each others ideas, problems and solutions. To generate dialogue, researchers cannot go with fixed solutions to a problem but need to listen to what is being said by the people or users. However, this does not mean that the researchers accept everything that is being said just because 'the people know best'. It is important to simultaneously understand, clarify, question and even challenge statements made by the people. It is here that participation and education begun to merge and result in solutions acceptable to both users and planners.

In one of the Maldivian islands visited, it was found that the community toilets had taken over two years to build. In addition they were little used and were not being kept clean. Yet this same island which is experiencing acute land shortage had reclaimed land to provide space for the building of community toilets. When the group was asked why the toilets were not being kept clean, after vague answers one man said that the real problem was that they did not have money to buy cleaning detergent!

Instead of accepting that as the root of the problem, the investigator challenged the answer and said that surely a community that could reclaim land and raise Rf.2000 (US\$250) for skilled labour could raise Rf.7 (US\$ 1) for cleaning supplies if they wanted? The group looked surprised, then started laughing

and then agreed that what had been stated was true. The discussion then proceeded to identify more serious root problems.

Group meetings can also be used to educate or clarify misconceptions. In Maldives, there is a strong desire to have the Government provide central sewers to which individual households can connect. Some people are somewhat aware of pollution problems and know of ways to avoid contamination of the groundwater. For example many men said that if a septic tank or soakaway was situated in a certain direction at a distance of 20 m from a well, the well water was not affected. However, this is impossible to practise on crowded islands. Despite this, arguments presented by planners based on pollution problems associated with central sewers have been rejected by the people.

However, sewers also lead to scarce fresh water being flushed into the sea. People are very aware of the limited quantity of fresh water in the ground. When the undesirability of central sewers was explained both within the context of pollution and depletion of the groundwater, people accepted the undesirability of a central sewer and flush toilets. This not only changed their attitude towards community toilets but also brought forth other possible toilet designs.

One of the toilets discussed was a 'Divehi Phakhana' which is built on a pier over the sea. It is made of logs or wood planks and a cubicle with waist high walls and no roof. The floor has a hole for defecation. Water for washing is obtained from the sea with a container. Tide action carries the waste away. This type of toilet has not been considered by planners as an option. However, when the possibilities were discussed with the communities, on the crowded islands it was viewed by the people as an acceptable option that overcame the problems of cleanliness, maintenance, costs, shortage of land, etc. In one island, the men brought back drawings of the toilet before the team left early next morning.

4. Aids to communication. Audio-visual aids play an important part in communicating ideas at a meeting. If a toilet project is at a stage where problems have been identified with the design and there is a need to alter the existing design or consider new designs, how can information on toilet types be obtained from users?

The most commonly used audio-visual aids are films, pictures, flannel boards, flip charts, slides, puppets and folk theatre. However, none of these methods lend themselves to eliciting detailed feedback on toilet designs and their components.

The use of films and theatre is useful in generating interest but not useful in getting specific feedback on design criteria. Rural people, the world over, depending upon their degree of isolation have difficulties in seeing three dimensions in a two-dimensional media. Often too, the medium becomes the message.

Use of pictures to get feedback on toilet designs is fraught with problems. People have even more difficulty in interpreting plans and gaining a three-dimensional perspective in a two-dimensional medium. People's traditional association with colour and other forms of pictorial representation can also lead to different interpretation of a picture than was intended.

A method that is little used but lends itself to discussion of toilet types in sanitation projects is the use of models in group meetings. There are several advantages in use of models both to enhance community education and participation and to obtain feedback on the advantages and disadvantages of different toilet types from the users.

The first is financial. To build real-life demonstration models of many types is not only expensive and time-consuming but it may not be possible. Models on the other hand can be quickly and cheaply built of any material.

The second advantage related to costs is that ideas that seem far-fetched can still be presented as options and may eventually be picked up with modifications as the most appropriate. Models can also be built with interchangeable, movable parts so feedback can be obtained not only on the design in its totality but also on the various components. Thus a toilet design can be presented with different types of walls, doors, roofs, wells and seats. What actually happens is similar to children's play with 'Lego blocks'. Adults through discussion, experiment concretely with the various components and come up with a toilet that they have designed and is most acceptable to them.

The third advantage is that models are portable. They can be used not only with formal groups but during house to house visits or with other informal groups in the schoolroom, at the well or at the beach. They are transportable to different villages or islands and hence feedback can be obtained very quickly from villages close to or at a distance from one another.

The last and most important advantage of models is that they overcome the constraints involved in the use of pictures, films and

dialogue unaccompanied by any visual aids. Even non-literate people can relate to physical models. The only transformation they have to make is that in size.

In the Maldives study, two wood models of community toilets with interchangeable parts were used. One represented the existing five cubicle block with a well outside, and the other a new design consisting of four cubicles built around a central well. Both were presented to groups with and without doors, roofs, etc. In every meeting they generated excitement and involvement. Both men and women spontaneously came forward, moved parts, added stones and sticks to present new ideas and explained the advantages and disadvantages of the different components.

Thus, involving existing local committees in discussion of sanitation facilities in conjunction with models of two toilet designs led to design of community toilets that were more acceptable to them.

The evaluation was thus able to make specific recommendations on the weaknesses and strengths of different toilet designs, both from the user's viewpoint and the planner's or engineer's viewpoints.

4. Conclusion

Community education and participation is not always possible or appropriate in its entirety in a project. However, elements of it incorporated in an evaluation can yield immediately useful information in a short time. People involved in sanitation projects need to boldly cross the frontiers of their own discipline and borrow and adapt techniques and ideas from other disciplines to ensure success in sanitation projects.

Reference.

Narayan Parker, Deepa.

Community attitudes towards public and private toilets in Maldives MWSA, Ministry of Health, Republic of Maldives. May 1984.