

SANITATION AND MALNUTRITION: CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

Synthesis Document: Sanitation, water and hygiene together helps in improving nutritional outcomes

Indian Sanitation Coalition, IRC, World Vision and Bhopal School of Social Sciences conducted the dialogue to understand the link between sanitation and malnutrition.



SANITATION, WATER AND HYGIENE play a fundamental role in improving nutritional outcomes. Malnutrition is a significant health problem, especially in India and a successful effort to tackle under nutrition must include clean water, sanitation and good hygiene. These factors have a direct impact on infectious diseases and are critical for preventing malnutrition. A large part of under nutrition is linked to diarrhea and other infections, which are caused by poor sanitation, unsafe water, insufficient hygiene including not washing hands with soap.

However, both sanitation and hygiene go beyond just providing the infrastructure. A mindset shift is required that is ably supported by consistent

communication and education for successful implementation in the long-term. A single-handed tactic will not take this forward; gathering a well-rounded perspective is the key. An evaluation of the need for sanitation, its link & impact on malnutrition and the overall health of children are key concerns that must be addressed to create sustainable solutions

DIALOGUE ON SANITATION AND MALNUTRITION

Indian Sanitation Coalition, IRC, World Vision and Bhopal School of Social Sciences conducted the dialogue to understand the link between sanitation and malnutrition. In this session, the panel members deliberated on the efficacy of current programs and the challenges they face with regard to malnutrition vis-à-vis sanitation.

The idea is to develop reports and communication



Dr. Prabhakar Sinha (WASH Adviser KPMG), Mr. Varghese Jacob (World Vision), Shri. R.P Ramanwal (Department of Women and Child Development) and Ms. Shipra Saxena (India Sanitation Coalition)

material in a simplified format that can be easily understood by not only the stakeholders but also a layman. The need of the hour is to develop simple, easy to use communication material that clearly elucidates the interconnectedness of sanitation, malnutrition and health. For example, the impact of diarrhea and the effect of malnutrition are reinforcing elements of the same vicious cycle and hence it calls for prioritization to end malnutrition. This has to be supported by the provision of safe sanitation, clean water and good hygiene practices including menstrual hygiene for the girls.

The panel members also recognized the need for a sustainable eco-system that not only highlights the challenges but also develops implementation strategies that reduces the gap areas in this sector. A combined effort of the various agencies that support this cause along with integration with the other programs run by the government and other institutions working in this space is needed. The participants of this dialogue also discussed the myriad issues that afflict this sector and discussed the best possible solutions that would eventually lead to better reach and results.

THE NEED FOR SANITATION, HYGIENE AND ITS IMPACT

In India, increasing population and rapid urbanization has had an effect on the existing infrastructure. Due to economic changes, sanitation has undoubtedly risen, however it has not reached optimum levels. Though various measures have been undertaken, the need for sanitation and good hygiene has not been translated into regular practices at the grassroots. It is compounded by the fact that a large population still defecates in the open and does not have access to toilets. Through its work, the panel members observed even in cases that had access to improved water and sanitation facilities, it did not necessarily on its own mitigate malnutrition or lead to improved health.

This is because hygiene poses a health challenge that has not been prioritized despite the fact that a simple practice like hand washing after the use of toilets can save several lives. Sanitation in the absence of hygienic behaviour will not prevent feco-oral infections. This is also true for menstrual hygiene where facilities are not available for girls. Repeated exposure to unsafe drinking water, inadequate hygiene, poor sanitation has a significant impact on stunting. This is due to diarrheal diseases, intestinal infections, and environmental factors that lead to poor nutritional status. This has a direct impact on the overall health of the household and hence education regarding such practices and a monitoring framework is necessary for improved hygiene and sanitation.

UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS AND CHALLENGES

Despite efforts being made at ensuring sanitation both, among rural and urban areas, the influence and results have not been far-reaching. A large part of the population still does not have toilet facilities and those who do, display low usage of existing toilets. This is perhaps the time to evaluate and understand the challenges and gaps in the process and shift the focus from only provision of toilets to the underlying complexities that influence sanitation behaviour among people. There is also a dire need to examine the ongoing efforts by both the government and various agencies and its real impact on the issue.

The panelists believed that a lack of a common platform and coordinated efforts among the different agencies like USHA, ASHA, anganwadi workers and the like have led to fragmented results. Besides, it was also observed that grassroots level workers have enough tasks and are not trained to effectively communicate the basics of sanitation in homes they visit.



If a robust co-ordination system is created among the various groups' efforts will be more consistent and this will produce better results.



UNDERSTANDING THE GAPS AND CHALLENGES (CONT.)

It was noted that there is a discrepancy in the messaging developed by planners and it often gets distorted when it reaches the actual sanitation work force that communicate it. This is further compounded with the absence of the right infrastructure in anganwadis that would help augment sanitation.

Another challenge in this space is the lack of child friendly toilets. This is a huge deterrent for creating sanitation awareness among children. Apart from that, because of open defecation, low usage or the lack of toilets brings forth issues with management of fecal waste. Data collected indicates that 23% spot sources of water are faecally contaminated in rural areas. As a consequence, streams and other water sources which families utilize for drinking, bathing and other household chores can easily become contaminated causing common illnesses. Education and mobilization within the community is essential to lay the foundation for behavioral and social change.

The reach of sanitation is not just about an increase in the number of toilets but also about accessibility. In slums, for example, one toilet has 6 seats that serves 200 families and that is definitely not enough to encourage the use of toilets within the community. This leads to continued open defecation and hence water sanitation, water contamination and malnutrition become a complimentary factor.

A huge factor in the sanitation space is convergence. The various agencies that work in this space adopt a singular perspective and focus solely on their area. Like for certain groups, sanitation is all about

infrastructure, for some its technology or management of fecal waste and for others it could be communication. Sanitation will have a far deeper impact if all the various aspects converge and adopt a multi-prong approach to tackle the issue. The divided efforts slow down the progress and impact the overall goals.

In India, unfortunately sanitation is viewed as a tertiary problem. The overall effort is curative and not preventive. If the water and sanitation problem is resolved in this country, it will address several other issues simultaneously.



Shri. R.P Ramanwal, Department of Women and Child Development

However, the lack of importance accorded leads to problems in tackling this widespread issue. Sanitation has neither been institutionalized nor is it actionable leading to disjointed efforts.



ADVOCACY AGENDA AND THE WAY FORWARD

The panel discussion minutely looked at all the aspects that plague the sanitation space. The panelists shared their experiences of implementing various programs in their regions and also talked about the challenges, issues they face along with some success stories. Sanitation has a definite link to malnutrition and evidence is now being generated to demonstrate that. The discussion veered over devising actionable points that would help them serve this space better. They include:

CONVERGENCE OF STAKEHOLDERS AND VARIOUS AGENCIES: This will be an important step in achieving sanitation across urban and rural areas. A combined and concerted effort among all the groups and agencies that work in this space is needed. Increased dialogue and interactions along with combined efforts will greatly benefit this space. Joint partnerships, collaborations, outreach programs, exploration of various forums and engaging with different development partners, which include the government, NGO's, trade organizations, chambers of Commerce among others is crucial to running successful sanitation campaigns.

ADDRESSING MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS: Issues with the lack of sanitation creeps into every aspect of life and myths and misconceptions regarding sanitation must be addressed at the grassroots to instigate behavioral changes. Making this happen requires substantial resource and time investment to inculcate a lasting change in behaviour and adoption of key hygiene practices at the community and household level. Communication needs to be simple and in the language of the target community to bring about a behavioral change.

LACK OF SUPPORTING INFRASTRUCTURE: Promoting sanitation via building of toilets is perhaps not enough. Even with toilets, people are forced to opt for open defecation because of unavailability of water or proper fecal waste management. Sanitation needs to look beyond the building of toilets and must account for creating the infrastructure that would support the use of a toilet in an efficient way. This would have to be supplemented with education on maintaining good hygiene to prevent malnutrition and other illnesses.

PARTICIPATORY COMMUNICATION: Another key factor is participatory communication. People need to be engaged across all levels of the sanitation value chain and a feedback loop needs to be in place to understand the challenges and consequently take appropriate steps to address them. This will help not only increase the reach but also maximize impact.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION: This is fundamental to achieving widespread prevalence of sanitation practices. Apart from the stakeholders, concerted efforts from aganwadi, ASHA and USHA workers, it is critical to involve influencers, leaders and spiritual & religious heads of the community. They have an undue influence in their communities and will be able to connect better with people and impress upon them the need and benefits of sanitation. The government, when it devises plans and creates teams include the right representation of community leaders along with other stakeholders for maximum impact. Volunteers can be on-boarded to spread the message of sanitation along with trained work force for better implementation of sanitation practices.

PLATFORM FOR SHARING BEST-PRACTICES: Developing a best-practice repository that captures successful sanitation implementation stories across the country will be highly beneficial to all in this sector. This database will act as a common platform that can be used by anybody working in the sanitation space as a reference tool for updating themselves with all the innovative practices that have been employed across the value chain. This way best practices can be collected, collated, circulated and disseminated among all working in the sanitation eco-system. The knowledge transfer will not only help to share success stories but will also promote immense learning.



Sanitation and malnutrition are inextricably linked and it needs education, infrastructure and support from all quarters. The government has launched several programs like Swaroka and Lalima to address the challenges of malnutrition, sanitation and hygiene, which are supported by other organizations like UNICEF and the like. An integrated effort will go a long way in this sector and will bring forth desired results.



For more information on the “Insights” knowledge series visit the India Sanitation Coalition [website](#).

This document is a product of the Insights Series; developed by IRC, India Sanitation Coalition and TARU Leading Edge.

For further information, please contact:

Vandana Nath, India Sanitation Coalition, vandana.nath@fcci.com | Shipra Saxena, India Sanitation Coalition, shipra.saxena@fcci.com | Ruchika Shiva, IRC, ruchika@ircwash.org | Manu Prakash, TARU, mprakash@taru.co.in