

Tiruchirapalli Municipal Corporation, Tamil Nadu

Community Managed Sanitation Complexes

Due to inadequate sanitation facilities and a lack of hygiene education, by the late 1990s, the urban poor within the City of Tiruchirapalli were subject to frequent outbreaks of water borne diseases. A lack of maintenance, rather than existence of toilet facilities, was identified as the main barrier to improved sanitation within the city. A local non-government organisation (NGO), Gramalaya, in partnership with WaterAid initiated a scheme which sought to involve women self-help groups from the local community in the maintenance of existing toilets in Tiruchirapalli. The initiative has not only helped improve the condition of the community toilets but also generated awareness among the local population regarding sanitation and hygiene. As a result of the action, the women's groups within the community were mobilized and empowered to operate and maintain their toilets whilst simultaneously improving their sanitation behaviour.



Population: 752,066 (2001)
Land area: 167.23 sq.km

A decade ago, Tiruchirapalli was one of the least hygienic cities in India with minimal basic services among the urban poor and frequent outbreaks of water borne diseases. Intermittent initiatives by the municipality to construct community toilets had little impact in the absence of regular maintenance which rendered the toilets un-hygienic and unsuitable for public use. Consequently they were abandoned.

In 2000, a local NGO called Gramalaya in cooperation with Water Aid launched an initiative to renovate these toilets and establish a community based system for operation and maintenance. As a result of the large scale public outreach campaign implemented to generate awareness and involve the community in the maintenance of the toilets, Tiruchirapalli is today 6th in the sanitation ranking of all Indian cities.

A unique feature of this project was the direct participation of Women's groups in the management of Community toilets as well as promotion of healthy & hygienic sanitation practises in the city.

The importance of the issue

Tiruchirapalli has 211 approved and 75 unapproved slums in the city. Until the end of the 1990s, slums were grappling with issues of inadequate toilets and ill-maintained existing infrastructure. These facilities neither had water nor appropriate disposal systems. Open defecation was rampant. As a result, outbreaks of water borne diseases were frequent. In this context, it was imperative to address not only the issue of inadequate sanitation facilities but also to enthuse the community to use the facilities appropriately and get involved in the maintenance of the same, both to ensure ownership and also to overcome issues of inadequate manpower within the municipality. The involvement of women's groups in the maintenance of community toilets, as promoted by Gramalaya and WaterAid in Tiruchirapalli, has helped not only in generating awareness in the community regarding sanitation and hygiene, but also in improving the condition of community toilets.

Part financed by the European Commission and running from December 2009 to November 2012, ACCESSanitation is working directly with cities in India and the Philippines to tackle inadequate urban sanitation. In addition, the project is also promoting sustainable sanitation on a larger scale through the transfer of good practice elsewhere in the target countries as well as from and to cities in Sub-Saharan Africa. ACCESSanitation is coordinated by the ICLEI European Secretariat located in Freiburg, Germany.

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Tiruchirapalli in context

Tiruchirapalli is the second largest city corporation in the state of Tamil Nadu in India. It has 211 approved (formal) and 75 unapproved (informal) slums in the city in which approximately 23 percent of the total population of the city live. Until the end of 1990s conditions in these slums were appalling and among the worst in India. But things began to change for the better when local NGO Gramalaya along with WaterAid launched an initiative to improve the situation, particularly from the sanitation perspective. The unhygienic and unsanitary conditions in the slums of Tiruchirapalli had resulted in a high prevalence of water borne diseases in the city and environmental degradation. The community toilets were in an un-hygienic condition and open defecation on footpaths and nearby streams was polluting the river Cauvery and threatening human health.

Mobilizing Women Towards Achieving a Cleaner and Healthier Environment

In 2000, a local NGO called Gramalaya, supported by WaterAid, began working with slum communities in Tiruchirapalli to renovate and manage community toilets which were previously under the purview of the Tiruchirapalli City Corporation (TCC). Gramalaya started by carrying out a needs assessment survey in the community to identify the interventions required to overcome issues related to poor sanitation. A holistic development approach was adopted with the aim of empowering communities to improve their health, environment and living standards through better sanitation. The result has been an effective partnership between the municipal corporation, local communities and NGOs. Based on this survey, new toilet facilities – both individual and community based, were built in the communities with financial support from WaterAid. The land for constructing these facilities was provided by the Municipal Corporation of Tiruchirapalli, which also guaranteed water supply and electricity connections. This initiative delivered a range of water & sanitation options, from the conversion of dry community toilets into modern flush varieties, construction of new toilet complexes as well as the installation of individual toilets depending on demand, status of tenure and availability of space. It also included provision of safe drinking water through hand pumps, stand posts and redevelopment of existing sources.

Gramalaya realized that mere construction of new toilets will not solve the sanitation issue in the city, unless regular and adequate maintenance of the toilets is ensured. This was achieved by following a two pronged approach; firstly through the identification and strengthening of adequate manpower resources for daily maintenance of the toilets, and secondly by framing a suitable financial management plan for the sustenance of the community managed sanitation system.

Involvement of Women Self Help Groups in managing the community toilet complexes

Gramalaya actively promotes participatory community management of toilets and believes that gender equality is important to attain the overall objectives of total sanitation. For the maintenance of the community toilet complex in the Tiruchirapalli city Gramalaya specifically involved women by imparting appropriate training through capacity building programmes. It started by establishing Women's Self Help Groups (SHG) in the slum communities, each with 15 to 20 members. All SHG members within a community joined together to form a Sanitation and Hygiene Education-Team (SHE-Team). The SHE – Teams were entrusted with the responsibilities of planning, implementation, monitoring and maintenance of the entire sanitation programme, including raising awareness within the community and ensuring that people move away from the practice of open defecation. On average, members of half the households in a community are part of the SHG, thereby ensuring that half the community is directly involved in issues related to sanitation in a slum. Initially, the community was reluctant to participate in the initiative but Gramalaya was able to break this inertia by specifically reaching out to women's groups.

Gramalaya now works in the slums through a network of WAVE Women's Action for Village Empowerment (WAVE) – Federations functioning in the slums of Tiruchirapalli. The federations are composed of SHE-Teams and other women self-help groups registered under the Tamil Nadu Corporation for Development of Women.

Sustainable Financial Management System for Community based Toilet Complexes

To ensure the financial sustainability of the developed sanitation systems, a token system was adopted, based on a pay & use system for the users. As opposed to the previous toilet facilities that were free of charge, the local population had to pay to use the refurbished, community managed toilets. Each SHE-Team opened bank accounts for depositing funds collected from the community. At the end of each month a meeting was convened and the SHG members provided the income & expense details to the SHE-Team. After deducting operating expenses, the profits were deposited in a common fund which was later used for awareness generation activities and execution of other works related to sanitation. Each SHE-Team and the associated SHGs took responsibility for managing the toilet on a rotation basis as well as managing the team bank account. Each SHG member works as a caretaker for a day with the responsibility of collecting user fees and managing the accounts. SHG members also sell soaps, shampoo sachets, oil etc. in the sanitary complexes creating awareness among users regarding health and personal hygiene.

After initial resistance to the cause, men from the community also became interested leading to their participation in the action. Consequently the Association for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (AWASH) was formed where men, as well as women, contributed to water and sanitation improvements within the community. A children's group was also formed though they were targeted only for behaviour change communications (BCC).



Community Toilets Maintained by Women Self Help Group

Results

Through this project Gramalaya has installed 4 hand pumps, constructed 8 community toilets with child friendly toilet facilities, renovated 4 community toilets in three slums, and constructed 252 household toilets with the help of 42 Women's SHGs within the target area. Currently, Gramalaya is working in all the 186 slums within the municipal administrative boundaries with WaterAid and the Tiruchirapalli City Corporation providing support as collaborating agencies. In addition, Gramalaya in association with Water Partners International, USA, extended credit support to women self-help groups for construction of low-cost household toilets and water connections to individual families. This Water Credit concept is one of the innovative projects run by Gramalaya which is actively supported by Water Partners International through its India office and local micro-finance institutions like Gramalaya urban and rural development initiatives and networks (GUARDIAN), Tiruchirapalli.

A study conducted by Water Aid India showed that the impact of the initiative on the health of the community was dramatic with incidences of diarrhoea among children falling from 73% to 10% and among adults from 10% to 2%.

The maintenance of the community toilets resulted in providing employment opportunities, management skills and advocacy work for members of the local community. Large scale uptake of the initiative was partly achieved through inhabitants of other slums and districts replicating the model within their own communities. A sense of belonging has developed among the target people in treating the community assets like their own and working for their maintenance and safe keeping. Inhabitants are now able to manage and maintain the community toilets neatly and cleanly.

The success of Women's SHG managed toilets has encouraged the Tiruchirapalli City Corporation to hand over half the city community toilets to SHGs for maintenance. Over the course of 6 years, the management of almost 170 community toilets have been successfully taken over by the Women's SHGs with support from Tiruchirapalli City Corporation demonstrating how women not only learned but are implementing new skills acquired through participation and involvement. The project has promoted women as leaders, and trained them as community managers. As a result, these women are now well respected and their opinion is valued in the society.



Individual Household Toilet

Sustainability of the initiative

The Gramalaya led initiative addresses a number of sustainability factors that help to provide long-term benefits to the community. These include the following:

Health and hygiene: Sanitation education and the (re)construction of community toilets reduced the practice of open defecation considerably which in turn reduced the incidence of disease outbreaks, specifically diarrheal cases.

Environment and natural resources: Conversion of dry toilets to pour flush toilets, backed with suitable septage management led to an improvement in environmental conditions and reduction of surface water pollution.

Technology and operation: Conversion of dry toilets to pour flush toilets with adequate facilities for children has resulted in greater acceptance of the facility. Involvement of the local community, in the management of the facilities, specifically the involvement of woman's groups and linkages to a revenue model, has contributed to the success of the initiative.

Financial and economic issues: The community managed toilets adopted a pay and use concept and hence the initiative was financially independent and viable. Linkages were also made to marketing products related to sanitation and hygiene, thereby enhancing the value of the community toilet complexes, which also served as an avenue for continuing awareness generation.

Socio-cultural and institutional aspects: This initiative led to the formation of Women's Self Help Groups, created awareness on health and hygiene aspects and also resulted in their financial independence through creation of micro finance opportunities and access to credit facilities. The men folk were also enthused to participate in the process, which led to the creation of AWASH (Association for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene) – an association to promote good sanitation and hygiene practices.

Gender Mainstreaming and Empowerment of women: Women were directly involved in managing all aspects of sanitation and are responsible for the maintenance of the toilets, financial supervision and reuse of earnings for slum welfare activities and renovation works. The project instilled confidence in the women of the community and enhanced their managerial skills and decision making power within the community and their homes. On the whole, the project has led to empowerment of slum women.

Lessons learned

The principal challenge in this initiative was to generate interest in the community regarding sanitation and encouraging the community inhabitants to pay for the toilet facilities. There were instances where local politicians dissuaded the communities from paying user fees for a service which hitherto was a free service provided by the Government – such populist thinking influences the community and helps politicians garner votes. The local NGO involved in this work overcame these difficulties through regular and sustained interactions with the community, including household level interactions, to increase their interest in sanitation.

Sanitation improvements in Tiruchirapalli reflect the fact that the key to the success of such initiatives is the involvement of communities, especially women. The organisation of Women's SHGs with access to credit facilities empowered them to manage their own toilet units resulting in improved cleanliness compared to those managed by the municipality. This significantly increases the likelihood of open defecation free communities. Achieving clean and healthy slums does not require huge financial investment; it requires a city authority sensitive to the problems faced by slum communities and supportive of community action along with dedicated communities and their support-NGOs.

Community management is best suited in this context since it goes beyond finance and hygiene education, providing a sense of ownership of community assets and a much needed social space for the marginalized stakeholders to come together and discuss other socially relevant issues, in addition to sanitation.

The Tiruchirapalli City Corporation has played an important role in encouraging the participation of the local community in managing the communal toilets and improving sanitation in the city. Although in some communities there were political problems where the community was discouraged to pay for services by local politicians, there was nevertheless active support from the Tiruchirapalli City Corporation. The Corporation facilitated community involvement, discussed tenure issues and ensured support through adequate provision of electricity and water supply. While the Corporation was not involved in financing the initiative, they were responsive to community needs and played an active facilitator's role, which was vital to the success of the project.

Replication

Tiruchirapalli City Corporation, the NGOs and the communities, particularly women, in Tiruchirapalli have shown that the sanitation problems in slum communities can be improved in a sustainable manner with multi stakeholder participation. Tiruchirapalli has set an example of improved sanitation practices for the other cities. From being one of the target cities for improvement, it is now ranked 6th in the National Urban Sanitation Ranking. The successful operation and management system led by community based SHGs has now become a model for the state of Tamil Nadu's sanitation program.

Budget and finances

For the community managed toilets, the only source of income is the fees collected from the users. Therefore, income is dependent upon the rate of user fees, size of community, household toilet coverage, number of seats and facilities available. Moreover, Gramalaya in association with Water Partners International, USA extended credit support to Women's SHGs for construction of household toilets and water connections to individual families. This innovative water credit concept also ensured economical viability of community owned and managed facilities.

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