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1. [Ending Open Defecation — Doing It Properly: SDG 6](#)

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[sanitation](#), [SDGs](#), [water](#)

This article is part of UNU's "[17 Days, 17 Goals](#)" series, featuring research and commentary in support of the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit, 25-27 September 2015 in New York City.



Goal #6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

For universal sanitation coverage, the formulation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represents a very positive step forward. It is a far cry from that of the Millennium Development Goals, where the issue of sanitation coverage had not even figured at the outset. It had taken mounting evidence and arguments on the positive impact of sanitation coverage on hygiene, health conditions, environmental security and ultimately poverty reduction, to include 'increase in sanitation coverage' as a target in 2002.

At the start of the millennium, 51% of the global population had no access to a functioning toilet; this now stands at 39% with about 2.4 billion people still lacking access to sanitation. Thus, including water and sanitation as a standalone goal instead of merely a target highlights a real effort to address a real need. In Goal 6, sanitation figures thrice, and we turn to each of these, enquiring how best they may be achieved.

First, the SDG aims to: “achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation, paying special attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations” by 2030. It is not clear what ‘adequate’ and/or ‘equitable’ should translate into and likewise ‘those in vulnerable situations’. Another important factor highlighted by its absence is ‘safety’. Millions of ill-conceived latrines are being built in developing countries every day, and these are going to become millions more points of contamination in the future — unless the issue of proper construction is addressed. That said, it is most laudable that the challenge of ‘open defecation’ has been brought centre stage.

Increase in sanitation coverage does not automatically guarantee usage or maintenance of toilets. In rural areas, where space is not a problem, moral suasion and education is needed to convince men to use toilets. Developing countries are also cluttered by thousands of fossils of abandoned toilets, which are in various states of disuse due to poor construction or maintenance. These then add to visual pollution, giving off bad odours and add to contamination. Thus, to improve health status, not only does sanitation coverage have to increase, but this has to be accompanied by behavioural change. The latter includes toilet usage and toilet maintenance as well as other hygiene behaviour such as hand washing.

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Second, under Goal 6, by 2030, there is to be expansion of: “international cooperation and capacity-building support to developing countries in water- and sanitation-related activities and programmes”. It is not clear how this will be achieved. Over the last three decades, there has been a perceptible shift in public policies to promote sanitation coverage through multi-stakeholder platforms involving public-private partnerships. However, there is a clear knowledge gap in the necessary elements for a delivery platform: one that ensures all partners have a stake in making the social mission a success.

Third, Goal 6 also aims to: “Support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management”. But how exactly is this to be done? Based on the experiences in sanitation accumulated through the MDGs, what are the most effective management systems? How should individual governments share the responsibilities of water and sanitation infrastructure management? How should the coordination be handled between different levels (central, state and local) as a function of the local context? Or should it be outsourced to private actors? If so, how should they be monitored and incentivised? Finally, should it simply be left to the market or local communities – with a minimal role for public authorities? A variety of experiments are already underway worldwide and it would be worthwhile to study the outcomes of these as a function of the context and the management design.

In sum, toilets are a classic pro-poor innovation. They empower through imparting ‘social dignity’. Further, by improving the health status of citizens, universal sanitation coverage can also boost economic growth. The challenge of sanitation is that it needs to be tackled from a multitude of facets. On the one hand, we need to guarantee that the toilets built are safe, useable and non-polluting to the environment. On the other hand, we have to ensure that the toilets are being maintained and used.

It must be kept in mind that sanitation feeds into nearly all the other goal targets, like health, child mortality, gender disempowerment, poor income generation facility, absenteeism from school etc.; thus the achievement of this seemingly simple goal could hold the key to others as well. Finally, ensuring access to safe water and sanitation will

promote human equality and dignity that in turn will drive the participation of the poor themselves to eliminate poverty.

This article, by [Prof. Shyama V. Ramani](#) & [Rushya Parihar](#), will appear shortly on unu.edu/globalgoals.