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Bringing Toilet Talk to the Table

by: [Arden Jobling-Hey](#) in: [Editor's Desk](#)

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Flushing out the truth about sanitation around the world

So, here I was sipping on a glass of cold Canadian tap water when I remembered that this Thursday is UN World Water Day! Fortunate citizens of the developed world (most of it) will celebrate the glory of water unbeknownst by raising a glass of H₂O, taking a nice long shower and flushing their toilet with pride. The very lucky ones of those among us may even jump into a clean pool, go for a swim in a freshwater lake, or embark on a last-minute getaway where beckoning oceans await. What bliss!

For many however, 884 million to be exact, including those who lack access to clean drinking water and usable toilets, this will not be the case. Nearly 1 billion people will spend World Water Day hiking tens of kilometres to get fresh well water, in hospitals combating life threatening diseases brought on by the consumption of unsanitary water, or relieving themselves in the water streams, rivers and soils that devastate a population by destroying bodies of clean water. Just how bad is the problem? According to an article in the [New York Times](#), today more human beings have access to a cell phone than to a clean toilet. Something isn't quite right.

While many of the world's unhygienic hot spots are found in slums or shanty towns (ex: New Delhi slums, Brazilian Favelas and South African townships), many are not as far off the beaten path as you might think. In Tanzania, I saw children use the corner of the school house daily as a makeshift toilet, and in Agra and Varanasi, home to the Taj Mahal and the River Ganges, it was no surprise to see women relieve themselves over the train tracks or cows defecate in the streets as hungry dogs lurked nearby waiting to feast. If you haven't been to India, check out this [TV documentary](#) produced by Vanguard where they take a closer look at the Toilet Crisis and what it means for the local community.

The idea of feces may make your stomach turn but imagine the reality for people living on the ground. According to [End Water Poverty](#), limited access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities seriously undermines socio-economic progress when it comes to projects aiming to forward health, education, economic and gender equality issues. For example, as Maggie Black points out in her article published in [the Guardian](#), the lack of proper sanitation facilities pose a very real safety concern for women in the developing world. Women wandering into the bush at night time are much more vulnerable to sexual harassment and the risk of being attacked. This can jeopardize not only their physical safety but also their reputation within the community. In some countries, women are shunned after being raped or sexually abused while in others, according to Maggie, a woman seen cleaning a public latrine is simply not fit to wed. Implementing sustainable gender equality programs where the safety of women is constantly in question? Not so easy.

So why aren't more NGOs funding programs that provide clean, safe drinking water and sanitation facilities? Well, let's be honest. Feces' doesn't exactly read "attractive" to stakeholders looking to include a "social commitment" page in their year-end report. As Black points out, which celebrity wants to be the face of feces? Fair enough.

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According to Zafar Adeel however, director of the U.N University's International Network on Water, Environment and Health, it is not only the stigma attached to funding feces that dissuades organizations from engaging in sanitation projects. In an article published on Worldscience.net, Adeel suggests that "despite all the attention these issues have received over decades, the world has not even properly mapped water and sanitation problems nor agreed on such terms as 'safe,' or 'adequate,' or 'accessible' or 'affordable,' all of which are in daily use by officials and policy-makers." This kind of back and forth about the definition of terms is strongly reminiscent of the talks that surrounded words like genocide decades ago and delayed international aid where needed the most.

Forget for a second the socio-economic hardships induced by lack of access to safe, clean toilets and simply imagine the costs to human dignity caused by lack of access to proper toilets. Put yourself in the position of having to squat at the edge of a river, behind a building, on a road, in a garbage dump, or on a train track. Feel exposed?

In a movie released in 2011 called "That's what I am" (a movie depicting the ongoing struggle to stick to your guns), a high school teacher is asked to come up with a formula for world peace as part of a local contest.

The answer? Human Dignity + Compassion = Peace

It may not be as simple as that in real life, but it's something to keep in mind next time you flush.

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outreach, events

Originally from Toronto, Arden has studied, volunteered and worked her way around the world. From promoting HIV/AIDS awareness as an international volunteer in Tanzania and teaching business English in Germany, to exploring hidden treasures of the Turkish bazaar and accepting a fairy tale proposal amidst the dunes of the Moroccan dessert. Arden believes that as long as there are unknown lands to discover, the adventure never ends! She holds an M.A in International Communications and Development from City University London in the UK and has worked as a freelance writer and a development practitioner for a number of NGOs.

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