



14 February 2014 - According to the World Health Organization, 1.2 billion people - 15 percent of the world's population – do not have access to toilets, and therefore, are forced to practice open defecation. This is a subject very few want to talk about. But if poverty, sexual violence and disease are to be tackled, it's a topic that can no longer be avoided.

Papua New Guinea (PNG), where more than half of the 7.5 million people practice open defecation, has begun to address the issue.

Government figures indicate that up to 18 percent of the rural population and 5 percent of the urban population have no access to a [hygienic toilet](#) . Health workers estimate the real gap is much wider.

Whatever the [actual figure](#) , the health implications are undeniable. International health experts say the safe disposal of excreta and hygienic behaviour play a key role in mitigating the risk of diarrhoea and other diseases, including cholera, dysentery, hepatitis, typhoid, polio, trachoma and respiratory infections, as well as intestinal parasites like giardia, and worms.

Over 900 children die every year from diarrhoea caused by unsafe water and poor sanitation,

according to Water Aid, an international NGO, making it a leading cause of death among children under the age of five. As children –and adults- continue to defecate outside in the open, they bring excreta back inside their homes on their bare feet, where their mothers prepare food. This increases the risk that family members will accidentally ingest faecal matter, and get sick as a result.

Studies confirm that efforts to stop open defecation are more effective when there is consensus among community members than simply constructing toilets or latrines.

Several previous attempts have been unsuccessful. “ Locals were told they had to use pit latrines, but were never instructed as to why they were important. Instead, it was forced upon them and it failed,” said Miriam Layton, co-director of the AT Projects, a local NGO working to raise awareness and improve hygiene in Goroka.



Since 2009, AT projects has been working to expand awareness of open defecation and hygiene, while helping local communities build their own latrines using “round loo” slabs. More than 1,000 concrete slab latrines have been built to date.

But this is a drop in the bucket. Thousands of villages across a country almost twice the size of the United Kingdom still practice open defecation. “It’s a small number, but you have to start somewhere,” said Esther Silas, the director, emphasizing that people are open to change, provided it is introduced in an acceptable way. “Properly funded, we would like to make Henganofi District (containing 80 villages) completely ODF (Open Defecation Free), making it a role model for the whole country.”

The United Nations Special Rapporteur on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation, Catarina de Albuquerque, [has warned](#) that the sanitation target set by the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is today [the most off-track of all](#), leaving around one billion people still practicing open defecation on a daily basis, and one-third of the world’s population ‘without access to improved sanitation.’

“This is a euphemism to describe the undignified life of billions of people who have no place to defecate or urinate and have to do it without conditions of safety, hygiene, privacy or dignity,” according to Ms. de Albuquerque.

## Toilets and poo remain taboo

Friday, 14 February 2014 00:00

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[Source: IRIN News](#)