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## Discussions on the next frontier for sanitation policy

### World Toilet Day, 19 November 2020, Webinar

In this note, we present highlights of a webinar organised by Oxford Policy Management on World Toilet Day. The webinar focussed on taking stock of the success of the Government of India's Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), and discussed ways to build on its gains. The webinar was held in the context of dissemination of lessons learnt from the '[Improving Households' Attitudes and Behaviours to Increase Toilet use - Improving H.A.B.I.T study](#)', an evaluation of behavioural interventions to increase toilet use in rural Bihar conducted in 2019. The intervention design and evaluation were led by Oxford Policy Management, along with its partners World Vision India and Ideas42.

This policy note, based on webinar presentations and audience discussion, focusses on three distinct challenges faced by the SBM:

- (a) reasons contributing to slippage in toilet use;
- (b) importance of safeguarding the public health gains of sanitation; and
- (c) the need for a contextualised Social and Behavioural Change Communication (SBCC) strategy.

#### **Toilet access and construction: preventing slippage in toilet use**

Some reasons for persistent open defaecation include issues with toilet design and functionality, and lack of access at the place of work, findings highlighted by the Improving H.A.B.I.T study, as well as other academic literature. Some issues that need to be addressed in the next phase include:

- **Toilet access:** The SBM made extensive progress in toilet construction. However, certain pockets such as remote and hard to reach tribal habitations still lack access. Also, toilets are not ubiquitous: migrant labourers and agricultural workers do not have access at their places of work, and toilets are often not available during festivals and large gatherings. Household toilets may be difficult to construct in areas where space is limited, requiring the construction and maintenance of public facilities.
- **Toilet functionality:** Not only is access somewhat variable, but there are also issues with toilet functionality that need to be addressed. Unless toilet superstructures are constructed to be well-ventilated, free of odour and with provisions for water supply, usage levels greatly reduce. Further, a lack of awareness of the functioning of twin leach pit latrines amongst household members has resulted in the construction of pits deeper and larger than necessary, and of expensive, sub-optimal septic tanks.
- **Local preferences and community involvement in toilet construction:** While the SBM has guidelines for toilet construction, these are often inappropriate for the geographic terrain and may not align with community aspirations or people's preferences and sometimes needs (e.g. elderly and people with disabilities). One example is toilets constructed in the household

compound which may not be used given beliefs related to purity and pollution. Another example is preference for a toilet cum bathroom in some areas (e.g. in Punjab).

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Findings show that the foundation for an Open Defecation Free (ODF) environment is far from complete. Future sanitation programming needs to continue to focus on access and use to address the last mile i.e providing (i) toilets near places of work, and (ii) retrofitting of toilets to address various infrastructural shortcomings which have resulted in toilets becoming defunct and unusable. A systematic approach informed by research on the scale of these issues as well as a focus on ecologically sensitive and context specific solutions is needed.

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### **Improving faecal waste disposal to safeguard the health gains of the SBM**

Under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 6 on water and sanitation, India has committed to the appropriate management of faecal waste. The Improving H.A.B.I. T study highlights the practice of prematurely emptying pathogenic faecal waste from pits with disposal in open fields or water sources. This undermines the public health benefits of safe sanitation, and specially puts marginalized communities at risk. Issues related to faecal waste management that need to be addressed for future programming include:

- **Emphasis on preventing caste-based handling of faecal waste:** The Improving H.A.B.I.T study draws attention to the outsourcing of pit emptying and removal of any faecal waste by people from specific castes, reinforcing caste-based hierarchies. Addressing this requires a focused strategy including greater mechanisation of faecal sludge emptying; stringent enforcement of manual scavenging laws and appropriate SBCC strategies to generate awareness on the twin pit decomposition process and promote self-emptying of pits with adequately decomposed waste.
- **Moving to a hybrid model:** On the one hand, in most rural areas without sewage systems, the twin pit design recommended by the SBM can be a very effective approach. On the other, this model is not appropriate for all locations. For example, in flood prone areas in North Bihar, these pits often cave in due to heavy rain and a high-water table. With toilet use likely to increase over time, dealing with the challenge of waste management will require novel approaches. Mixed solutions for waste disposal in rural areas are already being tried in several areas (Box 1), and will become key to addressing waste management.

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**A mixed model of faecal sludge management is more appropriate for rural areas.** Due to the variety of sub-structures in rural areas, a mixed model of disposal is more appropriate than on-site solutions such as twin leach pits. While a large-scale sewerage system is not practical, sewage treatment technologies can be adapted to serve a cluster of Gram Panchayats and small towns. For these technologies to be effective, there is a need to develop a chain of emptying and transport, implement existing manual scavenging laws and secure local institutional involvement. The first Faecal Sludge Treatment plant is being set up in rural Uttar Pradesh with the support of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and WaterAid.

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Box-1

Faecal Sludge Treatment pilot projects in rural areas – examples

- Indore plant in Kalibilod Gram Panchayat, Madhya Pradesh covering 3 Gram Panchayat's catering to a population of 50,000 (3KL/day capacity)
- In Durg district in Chhattisgarh; two plants are under construction - one in Patora Gram Panchayat covering a population of 15000 (9KL/week capacity) and the other in Kumhari Nagar Panchayat catering to a population of 67,000 (6KL/day capacity)
- A plan in Benipur Gram Panchayat in Amethi district, Uttar Pradesh covers 11 Gram Panchayat's with a population of 74000 (3KL/day capacity)

As these plants become operational, the dissemination of information on service providers for emptying and transportation services will be important.

### Sustained implementation of a carefully planned and contextualised SBCC strategy

The Improving H.A.B.I.T study demonstrates that despite extensive information provision by the SBM and a number of other programmes, households still lack knowledge on various aspects of waste management. One reason for this is that existing campaigns have been homogenous rather than contextual and largely focused on toilet use ignoring the broader aspects of reinforcing the link between safe disposal and health outcomes. An SBCC strategy is fundamental to addressing a range of issues to ensure sustainability of the benefits of the SBM – from an increase in awareness of the underlying barriers to the design of the pits to changing social norms on open defaecation and faecal disposal.

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### An SBCC strategy would be of great value for future programming, if it includes the following:

**(a) Adequate resources:** Successful SBCC projects are the one's that have received adequate and sustained government support, such as the BBC Media Action's Saucha Singh Radio Series and the SBM Academy.

**(b) Makes invisible issues such as faecal sludge management visible:** With investment into treatment plants, making government guidelines on containment and disposal understandable for people will become important. Some campaigns focussing on these issues include the edutainment show Navrangi Re and the Malasur campaign on faecal sludge management run by BBC Media Action.

**(c) Uses the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity** to promote the development of activities such as handwashing after defecation, not spitting in toilets, storing adequate water to keep toilets clean and social distancing. The messaging should be empathetic and focus on promoting behaviours both during the pandemic, and beyond.

**(d) Uses data to identify mediums for social and behavioural change messaging.** For example, recent research by Kantar and the Centre for Policy Research, suggests that the number of users of the internet and time spent on smart phones is likely to increase by 2025. Television viewership has also increased in 2020. As a result, social and behavioural change messaging traditionally broadcast through posters and wall-paintings needs to include television and digital media.

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## Panelists speak:

*Raghava Neti,  
Senior Infrastructure Specialist, World Bank*



"When it comes to infrastructure there are four elements that need to be kept in mind for the next phase of policy. One is access, the second is functionality, the third is the maintenance of a hygienic toilet, and the fourth is social acceptability."

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*V R Raman,  
Head of Policy, WaterAid India*



"We need to look at the caste issue carefully—it cannot be ignored. In order to delay emptying, households build large toilet tanks, which are then manually emptied. We need to enforce the law of the land when it comes to manual scavenging."

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*Radharani Mitra,  
Global Creative Advisor, BBC Media Action*



"We have to stay the course on Social and Behavioral Change Communication (SBCC) to do this. We need to match intent with investment, expand messaging beyond toilet use, and use the opportunity that Covid-19 provides to promote handwashing."

## Webinar recording

A recording of the webinar is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G3giPwt-Klw>