

Zambia

Chief Macha's toilet revolution

The Tonga people of southern Zambia are used to disruptions in their way of life. In the colonial era, European farmers settled on Tonga lands when the main road and railway line were built through their territory from what is now Zimbabwe to the

accept sanitation. 'When you use force, people will resist. That kind of resistance could go on for generations. Perhaps this is what has happened in our country.' Whatever the reason for the long persistence of objections to toilets in this corner of Zambia, in 12 communities in Choma district that resistance has now been broken. And the role of the traditional rulers has been central to success.



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The new campaign began in November 2007, when UNICEF introduced the 'community-led total sanitation' (CLTS) methodology into the communities. Another local ruler, Chief Macha, subsequently one of the most energetic of exponents, recalled the first time he encountered people discussing the CLTS strategy in Choma Hotel. 'I was horrified to overhear someone from UNICEF talking about shit, and I confronted him saying that UNICEF must look at the welfare of children, and not at shit. But I was persuaded to join the discussion, and I came to understand what it was all about.' Since then he has taken the lead in Macha's 100 communities.

capital, Lusaka, and many people changed their lifestyle and went to work for them. Eighty-year-old Chief Mapanza of Choma remembers those days and the way the Europeans imposed their ideas, even in intimate domestic matters: 'The settlers forced the villagers to dig pit latrines and instructed messengers to inspect the villages. Those that did not have pit latrines were severely punished.'

Chief Macha was one of over 50 specially-trained facilitators for CLTS. After the training, meetings were held in each community. The inhabitants were invited to walk around the neighbourhood, identifying places used for 'open defecation', and to talk openly about their personal habits. This is done in

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a humorous manner but the message hits home. Once people realize that particles of faeces left lying about get onto feet, hands, utensils, and into drinking water, and ultimately into people's mouths and stomachs, a sense of shame and disgust overtakes them. For the first time, people in Macha really understood what toilets could contribute to clean and respectable living. There can be no pussy-footing: the 's' word — normally taboo — has to be used. Chief Macha's campaign, complete with T-shirts, is uncompromisingly entitled: 'No shit please! One family, one toilet'.

No toilet subsidies

An important element of the CLTS strategy is that while every effort is made to encourage and advise the communities on technical issues, no subsidy is offered for toilet building. Their 's' problem has to be owned by the community, and solved by the community.

Experience has shown that where toilets are constructed in people's compounds by public health engineers, they may not be used — or at least, not for their intended purpose — unless the families in question are convinced that a visit to a dark little cabin with a pit is preferable to a walk in the fresh and breezy open air. That act of persuasion and conviction has often been missing. So the CLTS approach gets away from building toilets *for* people, on the basis that where real conviction has been brought about, people will be happy to build toilets for themselves.

However, if people whose cash incomes are low and for whom a toilet represents a major investment are to not only be convinced of the merits of a toilet but actually build one, the cost has to be within their means. In the past, the only 'officially approved' toilets in Zambia were 'Ventilated Improved Pit' (VIP) toilets, and toilets that flush, both of which are expensive. Now, under the government's national water and sanitation programme put in place to reach the Millennium Development Goals, the definition of 'adequate

sanitation' has been widened. Simpler pit toilets are included, notably those with a smooth squatting platform, drop-hole and lid. Correspondingly the costs of toilet installation have been dramatically reduced. So now it is more practicable to promote sanitation to new users without having to offer a subsidy.

The CLTS approach engenders a sense of shame and disgust in relation to their old unsanitary ways which 'triggers' the members of the community into abandoning 'open defecation'. At the meeting, time is spent working out how much excreta is regularly deposited in their neighbourhood and what its threats consist of. The costs of poor sanitation are also calculated in relation to medical bills and lost productivity. When they have resolved to abandon open defecation, a demonstration is made of how to construct a simple pit toilet, along with its costs. A village Sanitation Action Group (SAG) is formed, consisting of five men and five women, who assume the responsibility of assisting households to build their toilets and monitoring their use. Where a household is particularly poor or debilitated, the SAG will organize help.

Amazing results in two months

The CLTS programme in Choma began in November 2007. Two months later an evaluation was undertaken. Within a population of over 4,500, sanitation coverage had risen from 23 per cent to 88 per cent. More than two-thirds of the toilets constructed met the government's definition of 'adequate'. In three-quarters of the villages, there was no visible excreta, and these were accordingly testified as 'open defecation free'.

Chief Macha explains what he believes has happened: 'The issue of sanitation is not new in my area. However, the approach has given us a boost and the people have enthusiastically embraced it. This is because the villagers are not being asked to construct expensive toilets they cannot afford. All the material and the labour is locally available. It is not UNICEF's responsibility to build toilets, but ours. They



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are just here to support us and to give us professional advice. I believe every household in Macha will have a toilet by the end of 2008.’ Chief Macha has even threatened that those of his subjects without a toilet at that stage will not be allowed to shit.

Although sanitation has been promoted in rural Africa for many years, until very recently there has been a total absence of anthropological research into beliefs, customs and behaviours concerning excretory behaviour. In crowded urban environments, and settings where migrant workers were familiarized with toilets in hostels or other living accommodation, people adopt them relatively easily, but not in rural areas. The poor results from many programmes – not only in Africa but in other parts of the world – have finally led to efforts to understand these issues better. In traditional settings that have not changed much over the years, there are rules about where and when men and women are supposed to ‘go’, and what is acceptable behaviour. Breaches of these rules lead to penalties on offenders. Therefore, in these old-fashioned ‘sanitation systems’, elders and leaders also played the important role today assumed by Chief Macha and other headmen in the trial communities in Choma. The appeal to community status and self-respect seems to resonate, where ‘better health’ messages did not.

One compound, five toilets

One village headman has proved a particular role-model and exemplar. Joseph Mwaanga Simulangu’s compound in Chief Macha’s area about 60 kilometres west of Choma town has four houses, four kitchens and five toilets. The four houses belong to his four wives and their children. Why five toilets? ‘Four are for each of my wives. The fifth is mine,’ explains the 81-year-old traditional leader. Headman Simulangu described how, before the programme, the family of 30, which includes his 25 children, used one pit latrine. ‘The toilet was always dirty and stinky. It filled up too quickly. Thus we found it more convenient to go into the bush,’ he said.

At night when it was too dark, too scary and too unsafe to go into the bush, they went behind the house. ‘All you did was carry a hoe and dig a hole and cover it up after you finished defecating. But this wasn’t very good because the holes were shallow and they were easily dug up by



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pigs, dogs and even chickens which ate the faeces,’ the headman said. When it was explained how flies transferred germs from faeces to food, Simulangu understood why there were frequent outbreaks of diarrhoea in the family. The only way he could ensure that all four wives and offspring would change their habits was to give them all their own facility. We all know how unpleasant it is to clean other people’s detritus, should someone ‘miss’ the drop-hole: each wife will have to discipline her children. The headman also found it difficult to get used to being seen going into his ‘toilet house’, but he has gradually conquered his inhibitions.

The question of sustainability – will people continue to use their toilets if they become dirty or full, and need emptying or replacing? – is a critical one. Chief Macha regards the current activity as only the first stage in the process. Where construction is not well-done, the toilet pit may collapse in the rainy season. ‘We need to move towards building permanent structures which are safe. If all families work together, we will build better communities. My vision is to build





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a better Macha.’ The ‘No shit please!’ campaign has mobilized his sense of leadership. ‘Now I understand what it means to be a chief,’ he says. ‘To be a chief is to be a community leader. Sometimes it is good to be insulted over your convictions, because you are leading the people.’

Impacts of toilet enthusiasm

The impact of the toilet revolution has already had an effect on disease rates and on school attendance. The local hospital, Macha Mission Hospital, has noted a reduction in diarrhoeal disease cases since last year. Clinical care manager Abraham Mhango points out that the reduction in drugs and treatment represents a saving: ‘The money can be used on other areas of health care, such as respiratory tract infections. This means our health care will be cost-effective’.

Schools have been a special target of the UNICEF-assisted programme. At Choma Central Basic School, head teacher Phaniel Hachibzibe attributed improved attendance to the project. Cases of absenteeism due to diarrhoeal disease have gone down. ‘We monitor absenteeism every day, and we have seen tremendous improvement.’

At Siamambo Basic School 10 kilometres south of Choma, new toilet blocks with both pits and urinals, and hand-washing facilities, have been built for boys and girls, and their walls have been decorated with colourful murals and sanitation messages painted by the pupils themselves. The pictures and the inscriptions implore pupils to wash their hands after they use the toilet. Mercy Banda, a teacher at the school, says that both staff and pupils have become much more hygiene-conscious. Jane Siabbeula, a 15-year-old student in Grade 9, has become an assiduous hand-washer. ‘I look at the walls every day and I’m reminded about keeping healthy and clean,’ she says.

The project in Choma is taking place within the framework of the national programme for water and sanitation, and the government’s aim is to have a toilet in every household by 2030. According to a 2005 survey on living conditions, more than 30 per cent of rural Zambians, or 2 million people, did not use a toilet. UNICEF and WHO estimate rural sanitation coverage to be lower than this, at 52 per cent, with wide geographical disparities. Mobilizing all these people is going to be a major task, especially in remote parts of the country where sanitation can be as low as 17 per cent. But officials who have visited Macha to inspect the ‘toilet revolution’ are impressed by the possibilities.

Chiefs from adjoining neighbourhoods have already introduced the CLTS approach within their chiefdoms, thereby expanding the ‘One family, one toilet’ campaign to cover all 480 villages and 173,000 people in Choma district. But everyone is aware that momentum must not be allowed to flag. Much will depend on whether the same energy injected by Chief Macha will be emulated elsewhere. CLTS introduction in more districts and provinces is another matter yet. There is still a long way to go.

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