

Nicaragua

'Being dirty had to end'

La Horca, a small and remote village in Nicaragua, has recently adopted all-round sanitation – not just toilets, but wash-stands, wastewater drainage, and corralling the goats which were contaminating household compounds with their droppings. 'In the past, we had not heard of hygiene,' says the chairman of the village Water and Sanitation Committee (CAPS). 'But when we knew that being dirty was unhealthy and inferior, it had to end.'

La Horca is deep in one of Nicaragua's coffee-growing areas. But since coffee prices tumbled and the large plantations laid off labour, small farmers have a hard time making ends meet. Their pockets of land are unproductive and towns where they can market their produce are far away. Until recently, markets were only reachable on horseback over stony dirt tracks. But there is now a passable road. That road is part of their sanitation story.

The story began with water

When the state water company, ENACAL, with UNICEF's assistance, began operating a rural water and sanitation programme in the Matagalpa region many years ago, villages put their top priority on water. This is common throughout the world. However, ENACAL had settled on an integrated approach: a village keen on water would not be assisted

unless they made a commitment to sanitation as well.

The most important aspect of ENACAL's programme strategy was its emphasis on participation and community self-assessment. NGOs and other government bodies have long been active in poverty-stricken Matagalpinas villages, including in sanitation. But they have imparted an attitude of dependency. Villagers describe how this or that organization would arrive one day, make a speech about their intentions, and then proceed to construct toilets in their compounds. These were built to each organization's individual specifications. With slightly different dimensions, designs, and materials, these consisted of cabins on



Families in La Horca convene to devise their Community Action Plan

© UNICEF Nicaragua/2008/Obando



plinths with steps up to the door, situated over pits. Apart from asking the householders where to put them, no local discussions took place.

Not surprisingly, people did not use the toilets properly or keep them clean so they soon began to smell. Children did not use them at all: the steps were steep and they were frightened of the dark cabins. In some villages this building process happened twice or even three times, each time according to different specifications so that old toilet infrastructures were simply abandoned. This has left a strange spectacle of defunct toilets all over people's plots.

And still no effort had been made to explain why sanitation and hygiene were important. When Hurricane Mitch came through in 1999, several

Committee (CAPS) and develop their own community action plan. This process enabled communities to take responsibility themselves instead of letting others 'do sanitation' to them and then drive away.

In La Horca as in most villages requesting help, water was the villagers' main concern. But unless a drilling rig could be brought in, they had no way of developing a new supply. So they decided to build a road several kilometers long so that this could happen – and they managed it. A solar-powered pump was then installed over a bore-hole. After this they had to choose someone who could take on its operation and maintenance after appropriate training, and set up a system for paying his (or her) expenses.

Along with attention to the water supply, the people of La Horca were introduced to the concept of clean living. Once they thought about it, they had to acknowledge that they were living in squalor. There was rubbish strewn around, animals on the loose, and filth left about in the open. Existing toilets were not being kept clean, and therefore they were not being used. Reasons for this were discussed. It turned out that, too often, these toilets were not seen as an opportunity for dealing effectively with a noxious nuisance, but as places which represented a noxious nuisance. This had to change.

After realizing for the first time that dirt, excreta and life-threatening conditions such as cholera were intimately connected, La Horca decided to adopt 'total sanitation'. This meant a package of measures to support healthy living: clean compounds, toilet usage including by children, containment of livestock by gates and fences, dug pits for solid waste, and washstands for bathing and laundry with wastewater drainage.

La Horca today

A stroll through the village of La Horca today, or of other ENACAL-assisted villages in Matagalpa, illustrates that sanitation is not an event or a building, but a mind-set and a life-style aspiration. The process can begin, as here, with a road, which itself is a route to other developmental improvements. Once the desirability of 'clean living' has captured the imagination of villagers, and their leaders have decided to enforce an action plan and new community standards, a great deal is possible even with limited resources.



Handwashing is an element of the 'clean living' life-style in La Horca

© UNICEF Nicaragua/2008/Obando

local villages including La Horca suffered an outbreak of cholera. The horrors are still etched in people's minds.

ENACAL's approach was entirely different. When a village requested their assistance, their team started by consulting its leaders, visited all the houses to observe existing water and sanitation practices, and summoned village meetings. Using a special participatory methodology, they then invited the community to make their own self-assessment, appoint a Water and Sanitation



Case Study #9

Nicaragua: 'being dirty had to end'

But the efforts never end: recalcitrant householders who let their toilet fall into disrepair, water collecting in stagnant ponds after a shower of rain, or rotting rubbish piles which breed insects and need to be cleared away, remain ongoing concerns. And some villagers – now improving their earnings thanks to the ease of getting produce to market along the road – aspire to more facilities: a smarter toilet cabin, a biogas plant, a better wash-basin, tiled paths or a concrete apron around the house to make sweeping much easier and keep the endless mud at bay.

The Water and Sanitation Committee can respond to the ongoing setbacks and opportunities. Its initial responsibility is for overseeing the construction of facilities according to the community plan – supervising the masons, assuring a supply of materials, keeping the household's payments up to date. But after the plan has been fulfilled, they are supposed to monitor and continue to promote clean living. Their activities and the energy they devote to them determine the prospects of 'sustainability' – in so far as this can ever be assured. Effective delivery of change encompasses many different aspects, from the financial to the technical, the regulatory to the social. Whether communities 'sustain' their commitment to sanitation is ultimately up to them.

Committees often conduct household visits and inspection tours. They may impose penalties if they feel a particular family is deliberately lagging. In La Horca, three families were unwilling to comply with the village plan for the universal construction of toilets. After several visits from Committee members, and offers of free labour to help dig their pits, the families gave in. 'The reasons they were reluctant were laziness and costs. A toilet is expensive – it can cost as much as \$400 including all the materials. But they also preferred going in the fields because then they would not have to clean it. In the end, we stressed the dangers of disease, and they complied.'

In another village, El Portón, local women health promoters attached to the Committee visit households and engage in 'charla' – meaning that they speak about health and hygiene. They check up whether houses have decent toilets and are using them properly. Here too they already had toilets, but they were built without consultation and rarely used. 'Only ENACAL and UNICEF have talked to us about hygiene and made us aware. This is



A local mason improves his masonry skills in sanitation at a training in the Matagalpa region

© UNICEF Nicaragua/2008/Obando

the first time we have really played a part in a project and become responsible for its success.' When someone is recalcitrant about hygiene, the volunteer may fetch the Health Visitor from the clinic to accompany her. And if a family is causing a nuisance that affects the whole community, 'we all go and clean her house. After this, the woman will be too shy to allow it to get dirty again.'

In a third village, El Paraíso, people were very keen to obtain a new water supply because the wells they were using dried up in the hot season and this created a lot of tensions in the village. But when the ENACAL team told them that there would be no investment in water unless they changed their hygiene habits, including installing waste bins and accepting the need to use household toilets, they resisted. They said they only wanted water – they already had latrines which they didn't like. Only half the villagers were prepared to use them for their proper purpose.

“Sanitation is not an event or a building, but a mind-set and a life-style aspiration”

Eventually, the whole community came together and understood that wastewater disposal and sanitation were a must. “We understood,” said the village chairman, “that without sanitation, standing water in the village could lead to new outbreaks of disease.” Today, the situation has changed dramatically. ‘Our children no longer



have diarrhea. The water they used to drink in the dry season was terrible. And thanks to wastewater drainage, there has been a drop in malaria too.’ The long process of insistence by ENACAL and UNICEF has paid off, and the women of El Paraíso are not likely to return to their old ways.

Demand – and supply

There is no doubt that the dependency issue is important in this part of rural Nicaragua. Apart from the fact that it has fostered a spirit of waiting for outsiders to come and do things for poor communities, it has prevented economic development – the creation of jobs and services – around the business of water supplies and sanitation. When an income can be made, those with skills and entrepreneurial flair will help promote demand – in order to supply it.

Rafael Díaz, a Nicaraguan engineer who until his retirement worked for UNICEF in countries all over the world, puts it this way. ‘For years we expected the facilities we installed in poor communities to be managed voluntarily. Now I am convinced that we need to make it possible for people to earn a living out of this. Only when the community levies fees, reads the meters, buys spare parts, hires technicians to make repairs and fires them if their work is shoddy, will you have real community ownership and management.’

In 2004, Díaz began a retirement project: the training of ‘Enterprising community builders’, masons who would be able to install water-seal pit toilets, hand-washing and laundry stands, showers, wastewater and storm water drains, water-butts and water-filters, and other kinds of domestic improvements. Several courses have since been held in the Matagalpa region. Trainees with building skills were identified by ENACAL from villages where projects were on-going. Candidates have to pass a test and gain a certificate of competence. Díaz and ENACAL have run the course several times, and the curriculum is soon to be formally adopted by the National Technological Institute.

Given the scattered pattern of rural settlement, as well as the history of philanthropic activity which builds facilities for nothing, this is a

difficult environment in which to build a trade. Many villages are too small and too poor to sustain independent artisanal workers. One determined trainee is Jerónimo Valverde. His village, Llano del Boquerón, contains only 48 households, and it takes an hour on horseback for him to reach a road where he can pick up a bus into town. Valverde describes how, when he finished his training, he spoke at a regular village meeting. ‘I told them, I am not a professional mason, but I am here to support my community. If someone wants a toilet or a water cistern, or to line the well, I am ready. But you have to pay for my services.’

In time Valverde gained a construction contract from an NGO. Many trainees’ main source of income is from NGO-sponsored water-point and toilet building. Even if this pattern of service delivery is not ideal, at least the fees are now entering the local economy, rather than going to contractors brought in for the purpose. Valverde has also taken on private commissions to construct rainwater harvesting cisterns and water filtering jars – his wife has been an active promoter of his wares. He invested his earnings in a horse and tools, and is now available for hire as a carpenter too and offers his services in other communities.

Valverde has yet to obtain private orders for toilets. But Donald Martine, a more recent trainee from El Ocote, a larger community closer to town, expects to make a good living from them. His father was a mason, and he is keen to expand his skills and the range of products he can offer. He was closely involved with the ENACAL water and sanitation project in El Ocote and from there was enrolled on the training course.

Martine sees a bright future for toilets. ‘When I and my wife have our own water-seal, others will see it and want one too.’ Whatever the health benefits, it is the social appeal and status of having a decent household facility which is most likely to fuel future sanitation spread in rural Nicaragua.

Contact: UNICEF
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017 USA
www.unicef.org/wes



Case Study #9

Nicaragua: ‘being dirty had to end’