

Cambodian villagers celebrate having a toilet in every home

Sleng Village, Cambodia - A farmer on his way home caught a villager defecating in the bush near the village. The farmer asked the villager not to do it there so the villager moved to another bush but was surprised to get the same reaction from the farmer. The villager then had a heated argument with the farmer until the village chief intervened. The village chief explained to the villager that defecating openly exposed people to different kinds of diseases. He encouraged the villager to build a latrine which costs less than being sick. The villager apologised for his behaviour and agreed to build a latrine. The villagers then broke into an impromptu song telling how they encouraged each other to stop open defecation and built a latrine.

The comedy skit and the song were part of the celebrations held last Saturday in Sleng Village, about 60 kilometres southwest of the capital Phnom Penh, to show their guests how they stopped defecating outdoors and to trumpet their achievement: a toilet in every home. And for this, Sleng Village has become a role model of good hygiene to other villages in Cambodia. The story spread quickly attracting commune chiefs from five provinces, including far away Otdar Meanchey and Stung Treng, to come to the celebrations and learn from Sleng's experience. All agreed that Sleng Village is really clean. "I came to seek advice from Sleng villagers on how to replicate the project in Stung Treng Province," said Kharn Orn, a deputy village chief from the north-eastern province. "I want to learn from Sleng villagers how to motivate people to build latrines and how to achieve 100 per cent coverage fast," said a villager from Otdar Meanchey .



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Mr. Chan Ngorn, Sleng village chief, showing one of the posters used to educate the villagers that open defecation is not allowed in their village. The banner in the background shows a picture of "Chap Chean"—a famous national comedian who has been appointed Cambodia's first Sanitation Ambassador.

Sleng Village achieved total sanitation for all its houses in June, following the construction of 94 low-cost latrines for its 452 villagers since the project was piloted in September 2005. They are among the first few villages to reach full sanitation in Cambodia, a country with one of the lowest sanitation coverage in the world.

Ms. Heu Lon, who built latrine years before the pilot started believed that having a latrine "is hygienic and it is inappropriate to defecate in the open because you spread diseases." She is among the natural leaders who went house to house to convince villagers that "if we want our village to be clean, everybody should participate and build their own toilet." The success of the pilot also depended on the village chief who played an active role, motivated people, and made them keen to participate.

Mr Chan Ngorn, the village chief, said it was embarrassing to be told by others how to properly dispose of your body waste when it should be your own problem. “Before, we were afraid to use latrines because it was a habit to defecate outdoors,” Mr. Chan said. “We did not know its consequences and we were not educated on the importance of good hygiene.” But now, “we are very excited to have our latrines. Mine is almost full and I’m ready to dig a new one,” he said. Mr. Chan spent 10,000 riels (USD 2.5) to build his first latrine. He was among the first 15 families who built their latrines during the first week of the project, meeting 99 per cent of the target. By 4 June, the last four of the 94 latrines were completed. The latrines are simple - holes in the ground surrounded by walls made from tree leaves or plastic sheets.

Children in Sleng Village are happy that they do not have to go to the ricefields, quite a distance from home, to defecate. “Before it was difficult because the grasses in the fields were high and they hurt our skin. And when it rained, we could not go to the fields,” they said. Their parents asked them to use the latrines instead and to clean their hands with ash or soap after using them. “Before I was a bit scared to use the latrine at home because I thought a snake would come out of the pit,” a girl said. Now they know that latrines are safe. They also use the place to take a shower, something they used to do in the lake far away. The villagers and their children vowed never to go to the fields again to defecate.

“Sleng’s achievement is very innovative and, certainly, revolutionary,” said Mr. Tomoo Hozumi, UNICEF Programme Coordinator. “It is even meaningful because it has been made without any material subsidies from the Government or donors, only encouragement and motivation” added UNICEF WES Officer Hilda Winarta. Compared with earlier projects on community latrines, the Government-UNICEF pilot did not come with material subsidies. “What made a big difference was the participation of the villagers in discussing the problem and analyzing the solutions themselves,” said Dr. Chea Samnang, Rural Health Care Director of the Ministry of Rural Development. “The early projects failed because the aim was just to build latrines, not to change behaviour – there was no involvement from the community, no encouragement and no clear picture of what to do next,” Dr. Samnang said, adding that he was surprised at the speed of change in the village. Based on Sleng’s success, the Ministry has now expanded the pilot to 53 villages in six UNICEF-supported provinces.

Only 16 percent of the Cambodian population in rural areas has access to a clean, private place to defecate and urinate. This means almost two million toilets need to be built throughout the country. “Unfortunately, neither the government nor donor agencies have enough resources to support this,” Mr. Hozumi said, adding that it was crucial for the communities to take their own initiatives to improve their sanitation.

Before the project, Sleng villagers deposited almost one ton of faeces each week in the open field exposing its inhabitants to viruses and bacteria that can cause diseases particularly diarrhoea. The disease kills millions of children in the world every year and is also a major cause of child malnutrition in Cambodia.

The community-led total sanitation project was pioneered in Bangladesh in 1999 and has been widely adopted in Asia and Africa. It is an innovative way of mobilizing

communities to completely eliminate open defecation through participatory facilitation, community analysis and action, and no hardware subsidy.

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