

GLOBAL WATERS RADIO

Rolf Luyendijk and Portia Persley on Tackling the Global Sanitation Crisis

Interview Transcript

Global Waters Radio: You are tuned in to Global Waters Radio, a podcast series produced by the Water Team at the U.S. Agency for International Development. The series offers listeners insights from USAID officials, development partners, thought leaders, and experts from across the water sector, as they discuss current USAID water programming and cutting-edge research from around the world.

This week on the podcast, with the approach of World Toilet Day we're talking about one of the world's most pressing public health challenges, sanitation. Three out of every five people on the planet, about 4.5 billion people, face every day without access to safely managed sanitation. It's a daunting level of unmet need, and today we are talking about the steps needed to tackle the world's sanitation crisis. To help us understand the scope of the challenge and envision the path forward, we are joined by two thought leaders in the water and sanitation sectors, Rolf Luyendijk, Executive Director of the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC), who previously served as chief of water, sanitation, and hygiene for UNICEF in Afghanistan, and Portia Persley, Deputy Director of the USAID Water Office.

Thanks to both of you for joining us, and Rolf, first over to you. Every November, World Toilet Day puts sanitation front and center in people's minds and serves as a reminder that despite considerable gains in recent decades, we still have a long road ahead. Why is World Toilet Day important to you, personally and professionally?

Rolf Luyendijk: Well, let me start with a personal one. Over 30 years ago, as a student, I went to Indonesia for about 10 months and I worked on a project that treated black and gray water, and I remember I had to explain to my to my family, and a little bit to myself as well admittedly, why I was going there. And I said, 'Look, people are not connected to sewerage, and they have these pit toilets.' And, you know, if we then fast forward 30 years, it is quite sobering to see that still billions of people today are facing this, and are using similar systems, and we are all still struggling on issues like fecal sledge management and reuse of human waste. And you know, World Toilet Day reminds us of that.

Now, professionally, World Toilet Day does not only allow us to remind policymakers of the 800 million open defecators, or the hundreds of millions of schoolchildren still without school toilets, the cholera outbreaks, the hundreds of thousands of child deaths every year from poor sanitation and hygiene, but it also allows us to highlight the huge

successes. Like recently in India, where Prime Minister Modi made sanitation the top national priority under the Clean India campaign, the Swachh Bharat Mission. And in neighboring Nepal, after years of concerted efforts, Nepal is on the verge of declaring itself the first open defecation-free nation, and you know I can go on and highlight Ethiopia, Ghana, Rwanda, Indonesia that have really made fantastic strides in sanitation over the past couple of years.

GWR: In terms of keeping track of sanitation improvements as we have moved from the Millennium Development Goal era into the Sustainable Development Goal [SDG] era, talk to our listeners about the concept of the sanitation ladder, and why it is important for gauging sanitation progress.

RL: It has five levels. So, the lowest, you're not on the ladder yet, that's open defecation. And then you climb the ladder, and you come to unimproved facilities that is basically fixed place defecation, but for facilities that do not hygienically separate human waste from human contact. And then the next rung on the ladder is shared sanitation, and then basic sanitation, and ultimately, safely managed facilities. And what makes a safely managed sanitation facility is that it is not shared, it is improved, so it hygienically separates human waste from human contact. And, and this is the real crux of it, where human waste is safely disposed of or treated. So it has an element of effluent treatment or fecal sledge management in it.

GWR: And in the terms of monitoring sanitation progress, why would you say sanitation data collected through the World Health Organization and UNICEF's Joint Monitoring Programme, or JMP, is strategically important?

RL: You know, the short and overarching answer here is, I think, is to trigger action. We all know that if you don't measure it, you can't manage it. But even if you measure it, not always people manage well with data. But I think the JMP has made it very easy for different stakeholders to actually use the data to influence the management of sanitation.

So most monitoring is used for accountability purposes. 'We gave you some funding and what have you got to show for it?' The JMP data are used for tracking progress. Did we reach our targets? Are we making enough change? Is the change happening rapidly enough? What proportion of the population still defecates in the open? Now JMP data can also be used for planning for targeting and for budget allocation. That is to say once the politicians are already convinced that they need to invest in sanitation the JMP data can tell you where to invest. And you know, for me, it is almost every document of paper on water and sanitation references the JMP sanitation and water data at some stage. And I think there is no bigger compliment to that strategic value of the JMP data than that.

GWR: Portia, let's bring things over to you. From USAID's perspective, can you describe how sanitation fits into the Agency's overall strategic vision for improving public health, and what steps is USAID prioritizing to move people up the sanitation ladder?

Portia Persley: Great. On this World Toilet Day in 2018, USAID is really pleased to highlight the importance of access to sanitation, and to talk a little bit about how we are trying to further that goal of universal access. Last year, we launched a new U.S. Government-wide Global Water Strategy, and appended to that Strategy we had a USAID water and development-specific plan. There are a couple things about that plan that support the work that we are trying to achieve in terms of bringing about that goal of universal access to safely managed sanitation.

First, we have a new Development Result area around strengthening sector governance and financing, and in particular we have quite a strong WASH financing technical assistance mechanism through which we've been engaging both water and sanitation companies that are in need of increasing access to finance to help strengthen their ability to get to that private capital that includes working with them to increase their credit worthiness, working with them to increase their operational effectiveness, so that they present a reduced risk profile and can more gainfully engage with potential investors. Second, under our Development Result 2 area, we have a focus on sustainable access to sanitation and key hygiene behaviors.

GWR: And how would you say USAID is using partnerships to move people up the sanitation ladder?

PP: USAID is trying to highlight and elevate sanitation, and through our work in support of the Toilet Board Coalition, really focus on sanitation solutions that have the ability to reach scale, again with an eye towards that universal access, and keeping in the context that we have a pro-poor focus and we really are always looking for sanitation solutions that help us to focus on that sort of last mile, and really thinking about the enabling environment and what governance and policy changes need to be put in place to unlock that additional investment, and again, getting people onto the service ladder, whether it's at basic sanitation, or all the way to safely managed sanitation services.

GWR: Rolf, back to you, what would you say are the likely financing requirements needed at the global level to reach the top rung of the sanitation ladder to achieve universal access to safe sanitation?

RL: I mean, that target of universal access to sanitation doesn't actually need to be achieved by 2030. It is actually a completely unrealistic target for most countries. The spirit of the SDGs is that they actually apply to all countries, and each country sets its own realistic target depending on the point of departure, where they are. Now for the majority of low-income countries, a target of universal access to basic sanitation is

probably the highest achievable by 2030. And believe me, the world should be really really happy if those low-income countries actually achieve universal access to basic. So actually what is needed to meet the SDG for safely managed water supply and sanitation is about \$1.6 trillion. To put it in perspective, Bill Gates is worth about 5 percent of that, and that is that is only what is needed for safely managed access to water supply and sanitation.

GWR: And Rolf, last but not least, taking a step back for a moment and looking at the big picture, what do you think needs to happen to accelerate progress on sanitation globally, between now and 2030?

RL: Instead of us all chasing the numbers with scattered and relatively small projects and programs, I really think that we need to pull together and strengthen the systems and absorption capacity to scale and to accelerate programming. We need to get behind ending open defecation roadmaps, we need to invest in a common metrics and monitoring system across programs so that we can absorb more money, and we don't all have our own monitoring frameworks. We need to work across donors, and possibly across countries. We need to work on the Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) collaborative behaviors, and jointly invest in human resources, in both of their numbers and the skills. And we need to invest in setting up monitoring and accountability systems and the financial systems that allows for decentralized management.

And let me give you an illustration, when in May [2018] we had our WSSCC national coordinators here in Geneva. I asked them, I said, 'Which of your countries can absorb about \$25 million a year in rural sanitation?' And you know what? Virtually no hands went up. They all said, 'How much? 25 million in rural sanitation?' Well, and I told him, I said, that is the level of investment per year that is required in rural sanitation, if not higher. And if the government, if the systems are not there to absorb that that kind of funding, then as development partners, we really need to pull together to build these systems and enhance the government capacity. And then lastly, for nontraditional WASH partners, we need to strategically engage with societal movements. For too long I think did we think that change was made in New York and Geneva, at high-level U.N. conferences.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm a really, really firm believer in the U.N. But I have also seen that real change comes from the bottom up, from pressure from society, from good, willing people and action groups who actually put pressure on their governments to change. And linking up with these groups, I think is critical to get politicians to prioritize investing in sanitation.

GWR: Well, thanks so much Rolf and Portia for taking the time to speak with us. For more information on World Toilet Day, USAID sanitation programming, and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, have a look at the links below. And as usual, be sure to follow the USAID Water Team on Twitter @USAIDWater, and if you have a topic you would like to see us cover in a future edition of the podcast, drop us a line at waterteam@usaid.gov.

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