

## **Needed: A Pulse Polio campaign to end open defecation**

Less than two months ago, India was declared free of polio – a terrible disease that had previously crippled lakhs of children each year. This was a major accomplishment – one that was achieved through years of dedication on the part of government, national and international organizations, frontline workers and supervisors, and even celebrities and cricketers.

There is now an even greater scourge that India must battle: open defecation. Every day, most people in India defecate outside without a toilet or latrine, a practice which spreads a myriad of diseases, including cholera, typhoid, parasites, hepatitis, diarrhea, and yes, until recently, polio. Even now, open defecation kills more babies each year than became sick with polio each year in the 1980s, when polio was much more common. Among the children who survive, open defecation stunts the growth and cognitive achievement of millions more.

If open defecation is so much worse than polio, why have we not yet had such a campaign to end open defecation? The answer is because too many of our leaders mistakenly think that open defecation is a problem of infrastructure – one that can be solved by merely building toilets.

Although it may surprise you, this is wrong. Most people in India can already afford to build latrines – if poorer Bangladeshis and Africans can afford to build and use life-saving latrines with no help from government, then richer Indians can do so also. India's problems with open defecation fundamentally stem not from a lack of toilet *access*, but from the fact that too many people in rural India do not want to *use* toilets.

We are part of a research team that recently surveyed over 3,000 rural households about their sanitation behavior and attitudes. In four large North Indian states, almost half of households that have a working latrine have at least one person who regularly defecates in the open. Half of people who defecate in the open are willing to tell an interviewer that they do so because it is pleasurable, comfortable and convenient. In short, people in India defecate in the open because they want to.

Just as Pulse Polio workers went door to door to convince parents to accept vaccines, the campaign to end open defecation must build a frontline workforce to educate people about the importance of using a toilet. Just as cricketers and celebrities got on TV and the radio to convince people to go out and seek the vaccine, we must ask them to encourage people to build and use the toilets that they can already afford. Just as national leaders coordinated a massive effort to reach people in the most remote parts of the country, they must again reach the masses with the message that open defecation is not acceptable.

Open defecation is killing children, stunting growth, and holding India back from a brighter, more developed future. We don't need the government to build a toilet in every house – they won't be used; babies will continue to die; and children will continue to be stunted. What India needs is a toilet use revolution.

The new Government has declared its goal of eliminating open defecation in India by 2019. This is a worthy goal, and we applaud it. But no sooner was the goal announced than the political debate began: will the Government be able to achieve it?

We are optimistic that they can – if they break with old policies, and launch a latrine use revolution. If the upcoming Budget Speech announces a plan to build more latrines without a plan to promote their use, then the Government will likely earn praise for appearing to keep its sanitation promise – but it will nevertheless be falling into the traps that doomed past policies. Nothing short of a campaign to end open defecation – on the scale of Pulse Polio – will reach this urgent goal.

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