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WORLD SUMMIT AND EXPO

Toilet talk

Loos are big business, so why can't Singaporeans keep them clean?

S RAMESH

rameshs@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — Providing countries with basic toilet solutions is big business amounting to US\$1 trillion (\$1.38 trillion), said participants at the World Toilet Summit and Expo held here. The catch? Getting the citizens who are the targets of such efforts to understand why they should use toilets.

“Unlike water, which is needed for basic living and survival, people demand that. But in the case of sanitation, people just go and defecate in the open, they don't demand it from their policy-makers to give them good sanitation,” said Dr K E Seetharaman, director of the Institute of Water Policy at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy.

Each year, inadequate water, sanitation and hygiene account for nearly 94 per cent of the 4 billion cases of diarrhoea that the World Health Organization estimates occurs worldwide.

And industry players say, more needs to be done to reach out to the nearly 2.5 billion who still do not have access to modern sanitation.

What is needed immediately: Sanitation facilities for 500 million households.

Said Minister in the Prime Minister's Office Lim Swee Say at the summit yesterday: “This global sanitation challenge can only be overcome if the global community

learns to put every dollar, every idea and every drop of water to good use. It will take a long time, but it can be done if there is enough attention, efforts and determination.”

Citing Singapore's efforts in water management and sanitation development, he said: “Today we are proud to have one of the most modern sanitation (systems) in the world, with 100-per-cent coverage of households and public places.”

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Mr Jack Sim, founder of the World Toilet Organisation

But, Mr Jack Sim, founder of the World Toilet Organisation, says the challenge for Singaporeans is a different one.

“People have been asking me how come Singapore can host Formula 1 but can't keep the coffee shop toilet clean,” he said, adding that what was needed was enforcement, encouragement, and “a culture where people enjoy going to and respect the toilet”.

Also at the summit, being held here for the second time in nine years, is a whole range of cleaning industry products providing business opportunities for the sector.

Cambodians can now build toilets, Ikea-style

ALICIA WONG

alicia@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — Thanks to Singapore groups, some villages in Cambodia can now buy toilets Ikea-style: The parts for building a latrine with a shelter are delivered to villagers for self-assembly.

The materials used are also modified. For instance, the concrete mix is thinned, but ash is added to improve the quality.

All these efforts go towards lowering the cost of a toilet, which can range from under US\$100 (\$138) to as much as US\$500 — giving more Cambodians direct access to sanitation.

The project is a tie-up between Singapore-based non-governmental organisations Lien Aid and World Toilet Organisation, as well as the United States Agency for International Development's (USAid) WaterShed programme.

The project seeks to provide 537 villages in Cambodia's Kampong Speu province with their own toilets.

Cambodia, with a population of about 14 million, has one of Asia's lowest rates of access — under one in five, according to 2005 figures from Unicef — to direct sanitation.

With up to US\$300,000 in funding, Lien Aid developed do-it-yourself toilets, based on feedback from locals on their preferences.

According to project manager of Cambodia Lyn McLennan, villagers like the look of concrete, rather than plastic, for the walls. “It doesn't matter how poor people are, they still aspire to have things they are proud to own,” she said. A model of it



Top left: The DIY toilet being built. Top right and above: The finished product.

is on display at the World Toilet Summit at Suntec Singapore until Friday.

The focus is on villagers who earn about US\$2 to US\$5 a day and have disposable income, rather than the “poorest of the poor” who earn less than US\$1 a day, noted Mr Tom Outlaw, the chief of party of the WaterShed initiative.

The scheme leverages on social entrepreneurs and small businesses to develop, manufacture and market the sanitation

products for sale, which is more effective than just giving free toilets, he added.

By 2013, the team aims to provide affordable sanitation for at least 100,000 people and access to safe water for one million in Cambodia, he said.

Lien Aid has a scheme for families to pool their funds to buy latrines, and works with the Cambodian government to get people to “confront the impact of defecating in the open”, said Ms McLennan.