SAFE LATRINIES
FOR MANUS VILLAGES

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Safe latrines change Manus villages

June 29 is the UN Day of the Tropics, celebrating the extraordinary diversity of the tropics while highlighting the unique challenges and opportunities faced by nations of the Tropics.

SANITATION remains one of the greatest challenges in PNG today. In a country where an estimated 80 per cent of people live remote and rural, improving access to safe toilets remains a major challenge. This year's theme reflects a growing trend in focusing on child health outcomes and helping to stamp out diseases like cholera, typhoid, high diarrhoeal rates (the second largest cause of death among children under five years old in PNG) and the fourth worst rates of malnutrition rates in the world. Despite the growing awareness, the rate of increase for improving sanitation, the sad truth is that the proportion of PNG people with access to safe toilets has gone backwards over the last two decades.

How villages in Rambuto are responding

In 2012 a conversation between Lucinda Manus - Australian woman and Lynn Short, founder of InGO Wannaint PNG (formerly known as Friends of Rambuto) and community leaders across Manus, identified the need for improved water and sanitation as a priority. The decision to focus on sanitation was made; “clearly both are necessary for rural communities across PNG. Talking with community leaders in Rambuto helped us understand that the lack of sanitation first would affect the local ground water resources - ‘last resort’ water supplies - which communities across Manus are increasingly dependent upon. It also meant that the faces of more frequent and extended dry periods.”

And so began the search for options. “We were drawn to composting toilets because many of our partner communities are in low-lying areas where common pit toilets are not an option. Being on the equator means large parts of PNG are actually ideally suited to composting toilets. And being low tech is also attractive: it means in theory a train-the-trainer approach could be used to mobilise large numbers of disengaged young men - a target group for Wannaint PNG - in building toilets across the country. And thus the idea for the pilot was born.

The pilot/achievements

In 2017 InGO Wannaint PNG joined forces with Rotary Mainly (NSW) and Rotary Bombo and two Australian volunteers, Richard Vaughan, and Des Wriggs to kick off a community-led pilot to teach teams of elders to install the Clivus Multrum C440 dry composting toilet unit, a community-sized option with capacity to handle 50 users per day. Using natural materials to minimise maintenance costs and showcase traditional skills and crafts, the first double block for women took five days to complete. A train-the-trainer approach then brought in the involvement of young men who worked under teams led by village elders. Over a three-week period three double community-sized toilets were built by these teams delivering safe hygienic sanitation to the 150 women and girls on the three villages of Bundrow Island and giving young men the chance to learn valuable skills which could be translated to future incomes and improve their livelihoods.

Lynne says this first phase delivered invaluable learning which is now being put into practice in building the men’s toilet blocks, putting Bundrow Island on track to be the first In Manus to be 100 per cent open defecation free. But she sees the benefits being far broader than health impacts alone. “We’re seeing young men reconnect with elders over the transferal of new skills and re-learning traditional crafts like bamboo weaving. If the Govt’s goal of increased self-reliance is to be achieved, opportunities like this that help re-unite communities are critical.”

Lynne observes: “With proper training in how to use these toilets and with the solar fan and wind operated whirligig bird accelerating the drying process, dry composting toilets don’t smell. Our pilot communities have seen this and as a result we saw adaptation quickly reach 60 to 90 per cent and continue to rise.”

With the support of the two MPs and the CEO of the Manus Provincial Health Authority, Wannaint PNG is now seeking funding to scale up its train-the-trainer approach to the LLG level. "This next phase is successful, our three pilot villages of Popus, Lau- mat and Bundrow will have made a major contribution to closing PNG’s sanitation gap and improving health outcomes. They will also have improved food order and water quality, and helped keep young girls in school, protected the environment, delivered a valuable piece of material to support climate adaptation planning and food security and inspired young men to step into leadership roles."

Lynne observes that all are major challenges for communities across PNG and this pilot addresses each one. But what excites her most of all is the tangible demonstration this pilot provides for other communities themselves. “This demonstrates how powerful they are when they work together: this is grassroots governance in action and it’s delivering big.

Ecoflo

And it seems this pilot just keeps giving with news this week that Australia has a managing director of Ecoflo Water Waste Management, Peter Volker, is in PNG to scope market demand and the feasibility of local manufacturing and distribution of this composting toilets.

A positive outcome would create jobs and support the deepening of PNG’s nascent private sector. That may be transpire community leaders in Popus, Lau- mat and Bundrow and across the Rupatona LLG will indeed have something to celebrate: they will have successfully delivered urgently needed services to remote, rural communities, proving the real power of grassroots engagement and inspiring all.

* Story and pictures courtesy of Lynne Short of NGO Wannaint PNG

Toilets for Bundrow village: The composting tank comes in two halves, making transporting easier.