

Environmental Sanitation –An Experience at Mallavi.

By Dr. K. Sivapalan (2003) Presented at the Proceedings of the Jaffna Science Association- review lecture. Pages 68-74

Introduction:

Access to sanitation facilities is a basic human right that safeguards health and human dignity. By the end of the 20th century, 2.9 billion people still did not have this access and were not consistently carrying out essential hygiene practices. This situation affects the poor in particular and has a strong negative impact on women and children. Yet, sanitation continues to be the weak partner in the drinking water and sanitation sector. The challenge is therefore to change this situation by moving sanitation centre stage on the development agenda (1).

One of the deadliest childhood diseases in the world is diarrhoea (2). Most of the communicable diseases, diarrhoea, amoebic and bacillary dysentery, intestinal worms, tuberculosis, typhoid, Malaria etc. spread due to bad environmental sanitation. All these worsen the condition among already debilitated people, especially mothers and children, malnourished due displacement and lack of job opportunities.

Environmental sanitation is the key to development not only by preventing spread of disease. The environment has serious impact in the mental and physical development of the children. It therefore is very important to create good environment. Even if we cannot afford to create ideal environmental conditions, at least, we should keep the environment clean with available facilities.

Health program should receive acceptance and support, achieve the desired objective with minimum expenses, and link its efforts with those of other health and socioeconomic development programs (3). This principle applies especially to environmental sanitation. The over all problem appears not to be a lack of medical know how, but rather a lack of resolve by officers concerned to remove bureaucratic controls and free local communities to take more responsibility for their own health. This paper deals with the experience of achieving this by open discussions and coordination and cooperation of the people and officers in Mallavi.

The Problem:

Mallavi was the most populated and centre area in the west of Mullaitivu district comprising AGA divisions of Thunukai and Manthai East which had a population of about 65,000 during the year 2000.

The centre of Mallavi, where the bazaar is located, was infested with flies and unbearably foul smelling. Investigation revealed several reasons for this:

- A gravel quarry had been created at the centre of the town long ago. It was decided to fill the quarry by the garbage of the area and to cover it with earth. It was the responsibility of the Prathesia Saba. There was no coordination between garbage disposal and filling by the earth. The waste was being discarded into all over the quarry and effective covering with earth was not possible.
- There were no latrines in the area except in a few houses and the Hospital. Even the latrines in the market was broken and not repaired. Building new ones or repairing the damaged ones was not possible because the displaced people were

poor and building material was not permitted through the check points. The Prathesia Saba had no funds to do anything. Therefore the quarry was used by the people as an open toilet.

- The most popular ice cream plus food shop of the area (Seran Suviaham) was situated next to this quarry and was discharging a lot of waste water into this quarry resulting in fermentation of the garbage
- The market was situated opposite the quarry. All wastes from the market - fish, meat, birds, vegetables, and fruits - were dumped in the quarry haphazardly.
- Fish carrier boxes were washed around the well in the market and the water stagnated near the well because the soakage pit was damaged and not repaired. Coconut husks were left alone in large piles in the same area in the stagnated water.
- The slaughter house was about 400 meters away and the contents of the rumen were discarded all around.
- The animal wastes were disposed less than a kilometre away on the banks of Mallavi Tank. Dogs had free access to this and often bring pieces of rotten meat and bones into residential area.
- An influential person was claiming that the land of the quarry belonged to him and was blocking all attempts to fence the area by the Prathesia Saba.

Action taken before:

The people of the area were in a state of hopelessness because they have written to all authorities, the MOH, AGA and Prathesia Saba in the past. The MOH has written to the AGA and the Prathesia Saba. The AGA had instructed the Prathesia Saba to do the needful. The Prathesia Saba had 4 labourers who claim to be working to their capacity. No new recruitment was permitted. No funds were available to construct latrines or deposit more earth to cover the garbage.

First attempt to solve the problem:

After studying the situation, we (MOH office) discussed the problem with the officer in charge of the Tamil Eelam Health Services (TEHS) and decided to organize a meeting with all government and LTTE officers concerned along with other interested participants in January 2000. The AGA, The Assistant Commissioner of the Local Council, Officers from the Prathesia Saba, PHI and the MOH participated from government side. The OIC TEHS, PHI TEHS, Area Leader of the Political Wing, Finance officer of the area, and the Administrative Service Officer of the Area participated from the LTTE side. The local Police Officer, Market Contractor, President and Secretary of the Mallavi Traders Association, the Manager of the Seran Suviaham, The Manager of the Slaughter house and well wishers also participated. There was no difficulty in explaining the need to improve the sanitation of the area. Everybody was concerned about the unhealthy situation. It was very constructive meeting and several decisions were taken:

1. The Prathesia Saba and the LTTE administrative service will negotiate with the encroacher of the quarry and erect fence around it so that disposal of garbage could be regulated through the gate and defecation could be prevented.

2. The Prathesia Saba will clean the market well before end of February and the PHI will chlorinate it thereafter.
3. Washing fish boxes and motorcycles around the well will be prohibited. They will be instructed to carry water to a distant spot and wash. The soakage pit will be repaired by combined effect of Prathesia Saba and LTTE administrative service.
4. The meat stall in the market will be shifted to another location within the market because situated at that time within 50 feet from the latrine. The finance officer of the LTTE and the market contractor agreed to do this.
5. Turtles and birds will not be slaughtered in the vicinity of the market. Only meat prepared at other places will be brought and sold. The market contractor will ensure it.
6. Fish and bird vendors will get together and arrange for proper disposal of their wastes. They could pool money and appoint one person to bury these wastes in the quarry. Big fish will be cut by all vendors in a designated place to avoid spreading waste all over.
7. Slaughter house will be kept clean and the animal wastes will be properly disposed in pits dug in the jungle and dogs will not have access to them. PHI from MOH and TEHS will jointly inspect these activities.
8. The Mallavi Traders Association agreed to place half barrels (empty kerosene barrels cut into two) along the main road. The labourers of Prathesia Saba will collect the waste in it.
9. The quarry will be fenced with barbed wire and defecation in it will be prohibited by Prathesia Saba and LTTE administrative service.
10. The garbage will be deposited in designated places by the labourers and the Prathesia Saba will cover it with earth regularly.
11. Seran Suviaham will try to contain the waste water in their soakage pit. If it is not possible, they will lay pipeline to direct the water further into the quarry and ensure proper soakage without pooling.

It was a lengthy meeting and at the end every body left with a hope that the situation will improve. Every body said that things will change soon but nothing really changes after one year. Every time we approached and reminded about agreed action everybody had some excuse that something is lacking.

Final attempt:

After one year of running up and down, we decided to call for another meeting of all those who participated in the previous meeting. Every body agreed to all the previous decisions and promised to complete their part as usual. At the end we decided to have monthly review meetings to monitor the progress.

At the subsequent meeting every body was embarrassed because nothing had been achieved. But the discussion was different. When the decisions were analysed one by one, concerned parties came out with their difficulties. Alternate courses of action were planned and practicable methods were suggested. This started to yield results one by one. After four months and four meetings, we have achieved the following:

- Main obstruction was found to be the labourers. They could always escape supervisors because they could easily find an excuse. Often their excuse was that the LTTE leaders have requested them this or that job. Because only four labourers worked and they had to clean, Mallavi market, Thunukai market, and the respective bazaar areas they could claim of working everywhere and not work anywhere. Their bluff was exposed at these meetings and they were placed on no payment for absents without permission. They were placed under multiple supervision: the PHIs of government and LTTE services, market contractor, Technical officer of the Prathesia Saba, Finance section and Administrative service of the LTTE. This arrangement finally made them work.
- The Mallavi Traders Association, after repeated pressure, found money and time to prepare the half barrels and placed one for every four shops. This reduced sweeping work for the labourers. They were emptied regularly and deposited at predetermined places in the quarry.
- The Prathesia Saba changed its practice of putting 6 tractor loads twice a year to one load every month. This provided less exposure of the garbage and better covering by the earth. The PHI was informed of the date for unloading the earth and he will ensure that the garbage deposited till then is properly covered by the earth.
- A compromise has been reached with the encroacher and the quarry was fenced with gates for access. The market cycle park was shifted to the recovered portion of the quarry and it provided additional protection.
- The local police agreed to patrol the area during the early hours of the morning in order to prevent defecation in the quarry and the people were forced to construct their own toilets or go deep into jungle area to answer the call of nature.
- Fish and bird vendors united to contribute to employ one person who will dig a large pit at the centre of the quarry and deposit all their wastes. It was agreed that Seran Suviahm which also has a bakery, will provide ash to cover the waste in the pit everyday.
- The well has been cleaned and maintained properly.
- Coconut husks have been removed from the market.
- Fish market has been reorganised so that it could be kept clean. A small shed was allocated for cutting fish.
- The meat stall has been reconstructed with locally available materials but meeting the requirements reasonably well.
- The slaughter house has been secured and maintained well. A large pit has been dug at the site of animal waste disposal and all wastes dumped into it. Dogs, if they jumped in, could not come out.
- Steps were being taken to construct public toilets in the market with funds from TRO and other NGOs if government funds could not be found.

All these were possible in four months because of regular meetings where problems were discussed openly. Many alternative and cost effective methods with available resources could be identified due to this multi-sectoral meeting and active participation.

Discussion:

Suggestion by the IRC is presented to complete the picture (1).

Sector professionals around the world face obstacles in their sanitation programmes that are similar in nature, although the solutions are often specific to the situation. There is a need for concerted effort to facilitate sanitation programming through:

- Creation of political commitment and development of sanitation policies;
- integration of sanitation in water, health or water resource management strategies;
- institutional commitment and capacity to address sanitation issues;
- reliable low-cost technologies, including an approach for ecosanitation;
- effective involvement of the private sector;
- mobilisation, communication and social marketing, based on existing socio-cultural beliefs and conditions influencing behaviour and attitudes towards sanitation;
- appropriate community and user organization through capacity building;
- promotion/continuing education for use of facilities and consistent hygiene behaviour;
- School based sanitation and hygiene education programmes.

References:

1. IRC. Sanitation: Gateway to Better Health .
<../products/publications/idxsan.html> - SSHE project <../sshe/index.html>
2. Nasar U. Ahmed, Marian F. Zeitlin, Alexa S. Beiser, Charles M. Super, Stanley N. Gershoff, and Manira A. Ahmed. Assessment of the impact of hygiene on environmental sanitation, childhood diarrhoea, and the growth of children in rural Bangladesh
3. Morris Schaefer. (1974) Administration of environmental health programs. Published by World Health Organization, Public health papers, No. 59.
4. Halfdan Mahler (Director General Emeritus, WHO). (1997) In, Community Health, edited by, C. H. Wood, H. de. Glanville, and J. P. Vaughan, Published by African Medical Research Foundation. Page- v-vii