EHP Brief
ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH PROJECT

Improving Small Towns' Sanitation in Latin America and the Caribbean

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Background

During the past five years, the international water supply and sanitation community began to pay closer attention to sanitation. The *Global 2000 Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment* by WHO and UNICEF points out that 2.4 billion people still lack access to improved sanitation[1].

In recent years, there has been a significant and growing interest in improving water supply and sanitation services in small towns. Small towns are too small and dispersed to be efficiently managed by a conventional urban utility system, but too big for the traditional community management model used in rural areas to work effectively. Small towns require formal management arrangements, a legal basis for ownership and the ability to expand to meet growing demand. In Latin America, small towns tend to have populations of 5,000 to 25,000 people, and one of the principal reasons for the increased interest in small towns in Latin America is the sheer number of municipalities that fall within this category.

While the importance of sanitation to improve health is generally acknowledged, it has not received the same attention or investment as water supply has in small towns. This can be attributed to multiple factors. Most of the attention has been on technical solutions, especially in developing lower-cost technologies for wastewater collection and treatment, but without adequate attention to the sustainability of those investments or to maximizing health benefits.

The Methodology

To address this issue, the USAID-funded Environmental Health Project (EHP) elaborated a methodology to support the development of plans for sustainable sanitation services in small towns—plans that can serve as the basis for an application for funding or, if the funding is already secured, as the basis for an implementation plan. The sanitation plan that is the result of this process is intended to be equitable, environmentally sound, financially sustainable and focused on health.

The methodology was developed after an extensive literature review and consultation with experts. It builds on many of the principles and approaches of past EHP work and that of EHP partners including UNICEF, the Water and Sanitation Program, Water and Environmental Health at London and Loughborough (WELL), Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, WHO and IRC's International Water and Sanitation Centre. EHP's focus was to apply these principles to the small town context.

[1] Sanitation is defined as the hygienic principles and practices related to the safe collection, removal or disposal of human excreta and wastewater. The definition includes both on-site and off-site systems.

The methodology is intended to be used by a team of three skilled local consultants, working full-time for approximately two months. In general, one of the team members should be an engineer, one should be skilled in community involvement and the third skilled in either finance or institutional development. Field tests indicate the importance of having a team member with very strong community participation skills who can guide the process. Field tests also showed success is closely linked to the ability of the municipality to be an effective partner in the process.

Core Principles

The following principles underpin the nine-step methodology:

- Equitable town-wide solutions that expand coverage to as many residents as possible
- Financially sustainable services with recurrent costs paid by user fees
- Sanitation services that are managed locally
- Community consultation that ensures communities support the plan. Households should demonstrate willingness to pay for the recurrent costs involved in operating and maintaining a sanitation system
- Health and environment concerns that are addressed explicitly in order to maximize the benefits of sanitation systems.

Nine Steps to a Sanitation Plan

The methodology consists of nine sequential steps:

1. Determination of local officials' interest
2. Introductory public meetings
3. Preliminary data collection
4. Identification and costing of the range of feasible technical options
5. Discussion of feasible technical options with municipal stakeholders and households
6. Detailed analysis of selected technical options
7. Public consultation to discuss detailed options
8. Decision by the municipality on which option to select.
9. Writing of the sustainable sanitation plan.

Conclusion

This approach for improving sanitation in small towns places the responsibility to improve sanitation services firmly in the hands of local authorities rather than a central agency or external donor. The financial sustainability of the sanitation systems is closely tied to municipal finance, and having sustainability as a priority will inevitably lead to greater consideration of both on-site and off-site wastewater collection and treatment solutions. Finally, the strategy relies on full consultation with the municipality, so that a system is not developed for which there is no demand.

The full report can be downloaded from the EHP website www.ehproject.org For additional information, contact EHP, 1611 North Kent Street, Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22209-2111, or e-mail: info@ehproject.org

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