

# SANITATION, IT'S THE *BIG* ISSUE

## Tackling the poo-taboo in the Pacific

WHAT DOES THE WORD "SANITATION" MEAN TO you? Going to the toilet, washing your hands, flushing the germs away out of sight and often out of mind? Or perhaps more practically, dealing with solid and liquid human waste on small islands, and even at the extreme end—the cause of diseases and even death!

Poor or inadequate sanitation can be the cause of a variety of diseases such as typhoid, cholera, dysentery and forms of meningitis. One gram of faeces can contain 10 million viruses, 1 million bacteria, 1000 parasite cysts, and a hundred worm eggs. That's what makes the safe disposal of faeces the most important of all public health priorities. Still today, the majority of illness in the world is caused by faecal matter entering the human body because of lack of safe sanitation and lack of hygiene.

Additionally, people do not openly discuss the issue of sanitation throughout the Pacific region as the topic is often embarrassing, secretive and even humorous, all of which disguise the fact that sanitation could very well be the next great burden for the Pacific!

Globally, over two billion people lack adequate sanitation affecting almost every aspect and every moment of their lives—their health, their dignity, their environment, the well-being of their children and the development of their nations. Every 15 seconds a child dies from diarrhoea, largely as a consequence of inadequate sanitation.

Yet, the issue seems to be almost totally ignored and now is the time to tackle the often taboo subject of sanitation, or simply put, the poo taboo.

At the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission (SOPAC), we are now working with many partners in the region to get sanitation and hygiene on the agenda and help reduce the risk of water-borne diseases in the Pacific region and prevent wastewater pollution entering fresh and marine waters.

### 2008: The International Year of Sanitation

Despite significant efforts by governments,

progress on global sanitation targets has been slow and uneven. Recognising the impact of sanitation on public health, poverty reduction, economic and social development, and the environment, the UN General Assembly has declared 2008 the International Year of Sanitation. The goal is to raise awareness and to accelerate progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) target to reduce by half the proportion of people without access to basic sanitation by 2015.

But what exactly is "sanitation"? Sanitation means different things to different people. Ke-

So, sanitation is not just about your toilet, but concerns "all the conditions that affect human health, especially with regard to dirt, infections and specifically to drainage and disposal of sewerage and refuse from houses".

Some countries in the Pacific have reported very low rates of access to improved sanitation, ranging from less than one out of three households in the Republic of Kiribati to only one out of four households in the Solomon Islands (Pacific Islands Countries Millennium Development Goal Report 2004, SPC).

The test of a government's commitment to the poorest communities is the provision of clean water and safe sanitation. Yet, large percentages of the populations in Pacific Islands Countries still lack adequate sanitation facilities.

So, why is sanitation not being tackled more comprehensively in the region?

### Sanitation—how can we do it better?

Experience from past and unfortunately on-

going development work in the region suggests that sectoral, isolated approaches do not produce the best results. Sanitation is complex—it is not just about toilets, pit latrines, waste, infection and hand-washing—but a carefully balanced combination of appropriate community awareness raising, good health practices such as washing hands with soap, providing infrastructure such as wastewater treatment systems, maintaining these systems, and monitoring treated wastewater to ensure we are not polluting our drinking water or damaging our coral reefs.

Improving sanitation has far reaching impacts. Healthy people are more productive, at home and at work, healthy children are more attentive at school. Healthy rivers, streams and groundwater provide us with clean fresh drinking water, and healthy coral reefs play a vital traditional role in feeding our people, and protecting our coastlines from climate variability and extreme events.

Innovative integrated approaches that target both implementation of sanitation technologies together with training and awareness raising are key elements of the Pacific sanitation programme.

Good examples of these approaches in the region include a rainwater harvesting project in Tonga. Coupled with the construction of household rainwater tanks, extensive participatory training was provided with the communities on maintenance and operation of the tanks to ensure healthy and hygienic behaviour



lesoma Saloa, Secretary to the Prime Minister of Tuvalu, explained his understanding of sanitation as "wide and complex" with some of the underlying basics being the "washing of hands after going to the toilet, making sure your toilet is safe and doesn't cause discomfort or problems to your household and to your neighbours, and ensuring that whatever you flush out in your toilet is properly treated and doesn't leak out into the surroundings or into the groundwater".

Pacific leaders at the Asia-Pacific Water Summit held in Beppu, Japan (3-4 December 2007), agreed to "recognise the people's right to safe drinking water and basic sanitation as a basic human right and a fundamental aspect of human security" and "accord the highest priority to water and sanitation in our economic and development plans and agendas and to increase substantially our allocation of resources to the water and sanitation sectors".

# HEALTH

to provide safe and clean water. Community members decided where the tanks were built, how they were to be constructed, and identified the skills they needed to learn to look after the tanks to provide clean water for themselves and their families.

Larger development projects are also taking similar approaches. The Sanitation Park housed by the Fiji School of Medicine focuses on capacity building of targeted communities on the design and use of common wastewater treatment systems such as Ventilated Improved Pit Latrines (VIP), Composting Toilets and other simple but effective sanitation technologies.

Cut-away, dry models of these toilet systems are available for community members, students and others to see and learn from. The Sanitation Park provides a Pacific regional training facility for environmental health workers to gain a better understanding of how these systems actually dispose of, and treat human waste.

It is important to move beyond the "out-of-sight out-of-mind" approach, and raise awareness about where our waste goes, and how we need to treat it in order to protect our environment, ourselves, as well as our children in the future.

Tuvalu has considered a number of alternative sanitation systems over the past 15 years to address the groundwater and lagoon pollution problem in the country's capital Funafuti, caused by leaking septic tanks and soak pits.

The cost of purchasing and installing compost toilets in homes was found to be comparable to the costs that households are currently incurring as a result of poor waste management practices on Funafuti (not to mention the added value of selling compost and water savings associated with compost toilets).

It is estimated that if all residents were to convert to compost toilets, Tuvalu could expect to save A\$2 million annually. A programme implemented by the Public Works Division of the Ministry of Energy and Works will now start financing the construction of composting toilets with the assistance of SOPAC, the EU, AusAID and GEF.

## **The truth of the matter**

Poor sanitation leads to a number of significant financial and economic costs. Direct medical costs associated with treating sanitation-related illnesses and lost income through reduced or lost productivity can be reduced through the provision of adequate sanitation.

Every dollar spent on improving sanitation generates economic benefits (by about nine times!) that far exceed the required sanitation investments. The cost of inaction is enormous.

Achieving the Millennium Development Goal for sanitation would result in a global saving of US\$66 billion through time saved, increased productivity and reductions in illness and death.

To achieve the target of halving the proportion of people without access to improved sanitation by 2015, concrete actions must be taken as already demonstrated by Tuvalu.

Households, communities, local and national governments, civil society, regional and international organisations need to work together. The strategy for the 2008 International Year of Sanitation campaign is to increase awareness, leading to decisive actions in support of this often very private issue.

Addressing the issue of sanitation from more than one sector is vital for the long-term environmental sustainability and health and hygiene of our Pacific region. In the future, all water programmes need to be implemented with sound sanitation programmes.

Pacific Islands Countries will join forces with SOPAC and its partners to break through the poo-taboo and improve access to sanitation in the region. The issues of water, sanitation and hygiene should no longer be ignored in the Pacific's development debates. □

*• (Article provided courtesy of SOPAC.)*



**Ministry of Public Enterprises**

## **EXPRESSIONS OF INTEREST YAQARA PASTORAL COMPANY LIMITED**

Yaqara Pastoral Company Limited ('YPCL'), which operates from the Yaqara Estate ('Estate'), is a wholly owned Government Commercial Company with beef production and breeding as its core business.

The Estate has a total of 11,853 acres of landmass, which contains Class 1 alluvial flats, hills with shallow soils and class 3 or 4 steep slopes with rocky outcrops.

The Estate is situated in the North West of Viti Levu, the largest island in the Fiji Island Group. It is located in the district of Rakiraki alongside the Kings Road and is 13km from Tavua, the nearest town.

The Estate includes spectacular coastal and mountain sites. It is a short boat trip away from the island of Nananu-I-Ra and the Mamanuca and Yasawa Island groups. The Estate is a few hours drive from the Nadi International Airport.

Adjacent to the Estate is the water bottling plant for "Fiji Water".

The Government of Fiji is seeking expressions of interest ('EOI') for the YPCL owned Estate and/or business for the purposes of developing an agro-based operation or other viable economic development.

EOIs will be assessed on inter alia, the:

- proven record to undertake the proposed business;
- level of investment;
- level and type of technology and expertise to be utilised;
- returns on investment for YPCL;
- employment opportunities for the citizens of Fiji;
- viability of business proposal;
- overall economic benefit to the people of Fiji; and,
- commencement date of proposal.

The sealed copy of the EOI, marked 'Expression of Interest, YPCL' is to be submitted to the **Ministry of Public Enterprises Office at Level 4 Civic Tower, Victoria Parade, Suva, Fiji**, to the attention of the Permanent Secretary.

All EOIs must be received by **4.30pm, 7 April 2008**.

Email copies of EOIs shall be accepted however hard copies must also be supplied by the close date.

Contact Kavita Raju at the Ministry of Public Enterprises on phone (679) 331 5577, facsimile (679) 331 5035 or [kraju@govnet.gov.fj](mailto:kraju@govnet.gov.fj) for further information.