

Cape Town study confirms that **TOILETS COUNT, PEOPLE MATTER**



Communities living on the periphery of service delivery often have no option but to share communal sanitation facilities. A research team from the University of Cape Town (UCT) investigated the patterns of usage and the negotiation process surrounding such facilities in one informal area in Cape Town. As they discovered, providing sustainable sanitation solutions in such areas is a much more complex issue than often thought. Article by Jonathan Hilligan, Andrew Spiegel and Neil Armitage.

The municipal elections in 2011 and the politicising around the so-called 'open toilets' of Makhaza (Western Cape) and Moqhaka (Free State) highlighted the challenges South Africa still faces around sustainable sanitation provision in many parts of South Africa. Like many other cities and towns across the country, the City of Cape Town (CoCT) is faced with a problem of how to provide adequate sanitation

services to its more than 200 informal settlements.

While basic services have been provided to many, they often fail to meet residents' expectations as a consequence of poor operation and maintenance programmes or inadequate user consultation. One informal settlement in Cape Town, Barcelona, has provided a specific set of geographical conditions which have compounded the problems associated with sanitation delivery and required an alternative approach to conventional gravity-based sanitation provision.

UNIQUE SETTLEMENT

The settlement itself is unique as it is situated directly atop a capped and abandoned solid waste site. The site, originally an open piece of ground with a small dam, was used as a municipal dump site until the late 1980s. It was originally earmarked for the development of a sport stadium – but Barcelona was established instead in 1992, initially as a 'temporary' settlement.

The year 1993/94 saw an influx of people onto the site who staked out plots and began to build houses on the capping layer of gravel covering the solid waste below. By 2010, the settlement had a population of around 6 600 people living on 28 ha of land. At this time the settlement was serviced by 367 container toilets and 157 pit latrines.

The solid waste poses technical difficulties as regards the installation of conventional waterborne sanitation specifically in relation to the composition of the ground and the potential risks involved in excavating land fill including differential settling. As a result of these challenges, Barcelona was selected by CoCT, and the UCT Urban Water Management (UWM) Group, a research team comprising civil engineering and social students, as a potentially good site to pilot alternative sewerage technology under a project funded by the Water Research Commission.

Often alternative sewerage systems fail because of socially-related issues rather than the technology itself. The UWM group recognised

the intrinsic value, both in terms of research data, and potential alternatives to directing a sanitation service approach, in exploring the social dimension of access to basic services. Thus the team conducted research in Barcelona over six weeks, recording people's daily experiences with their current sanitation service. A handful of those experiences are related here.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Mawethu* is a quietly spoken 32-year-old man living with his girlfriend in a single room house adjacent to a large church building in the centre of the settlement and itself bordering Barcelona's Community Centre. He said that he preferred his privacy and seldom interacted with other residents. However, the location of his home, and its proximity to two container toilets, made this difficult.

Mawethu's front door opens onto the path running along the outside the church fence resulting in a steady stream of traffic. The toilets are cleaned once or twice a week, but because of the high number of users, the toilets filled much faster than the others, and often reach overflow level before being collected and emptied by CoCT's agents.

According to Mawethu, the toilets are very unpleasant to use as they often emit a terrible smell because of their overfull state. Locking the toilet closest to his house had the unintended effect of passers-by constantly bothering him for the key. He eventually abandoned this action.

In an effort to prevent the toilets from filling up so quickly, Mawethu then scribbled on the inside wall of the closest toilet that it should not be used for urination. His scrawled message, however, resulted in male passers-by urinating against the outside of the container instead, exacerbating the stink. He consequently uses the toilet as little as possible

* Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of the participants.

preferring to wait till he was at work to use the toilet there.

While Mawethu has relatively free access to two toilets, he often has to use toilets elsewhere in the settlement or at work, especially when those closest to his house are full. Having to share the facilities with so many people indicates that it is difficult to guess what level or quality of service is available to a household simply by assessing household members' proximity to a toilet.

FROM SOME TO NONE

While Mawethu has problems concerning the public sharing of facilities, some residents have no regular access to private or to public sanitation facilities. Survey results provided by a local non-governmental organisation indicate that around 87 households have no access to a toilet and practise open defecation. Yet the same survey indicates that there are nominally enough toilets in the settlement to satisfy the minimum five households to one toilet ratio established by the national government.

Atini, a relative newcomer to Barcelona, reported having had occasionally to practice open defecation. He explained that this is because all the toilets adjacent to his

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house have already been appropriated and locked by neighbours or other residents. His neighbours only sometimes, reluctantly, lend him a key. When the keyholders are absent, it leaves him with no alternatives but to defecate on the nearby road reserve alongside the N2 highway.

Atini's experience of sanitation services in Barcelona provides a unique glimpse into the highly contested spaces generated through unequal access to facilities. Atini's access to the facilities near his home is impeded through other residents' appropriation of those facilities for private use. Atini suggested that eventually he might gain access to one of the locked toilets close to his house. However, he claimed that as a new resident in the settlement this might be difficult as he had not yet established close relationships with his neighbours.

A row of container toilets along a road in Barcelona. Providing sanitation to this informal settlement, located in Cape Town, is made difficult by the fact that it is located on a former municipal dump site.



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This container toilet is shared between five households. Each household has a key to the toilet.

Atini asserted that all residents living within a certain proximity to a toilet should have access to it, and that toilets should not be 'owned' by any resident. However, many residents did not share his sentiments about such ownership and several indicated in interviews that, since there were insufficient toilets for each households to have its own, they preferred shared 'ownership' of a single toilet over publicly accessible communal facilities.

HOLDING THE KEY

Barcelona resident, only known as Mawethu, in front of his house with one toilet to the left and another to the right in the shadow of a neighbour's house.

An example of such sharing of a toilet is the case of Martha, a middle-aged woman living in a household with her husband and two children. They share one container toilet with five neighbouring

households. Each household has its own key for the toilet stall padlock so that effectively the toilet is shared by 18 people.

Martha and her neighbours decided to padlock the toilet as it is on a footpath and often used by passers-by. The decision, according to Martha, was made informally among two of her closest neighbours. Once the toilet was locked other neighbours who were familiar with Martha and the other key holders quickly requested access to the toilet. Access was then extended on the basis of the residents' proximity to the toilet (no more than one house away).

Much like Mawethu, Martha and her neighbours had hoped that by locking the toilet it would reduce the rate at which the container filled up. Yet, she complained that because so many people used the toilet, it was often left very dirty. Unhappily, but out of a sense of necessity, she now takes personal responsibility for cleaning the toilet, a service she provides in addition to the CoCT's agents' regular cleaning of the toilet when the container is emptied. Her relationship with her neighbours is now strained, as she feels they do not respect her by not cleaning up after themselves when they use the toilet.

Moreover, Martha complained that the cleaners responsible for emptying the container toilet often does not clean it properly, leaving behind seats stained with waste or an only partially empty container. She suggested that the emptying service

be provided more than once a week. Martha did concede that locking the toilet has a drawback in that if no key holders are present when the servicing team arrives – which apparently does not happen according to a regular schedule – the container remains full until the next collection. Luckily, this happens seldom.

Martha's experience stands in contrast with that of Athini. Where the latter's problem stems from having no claim to a specific toilet because of a lack of interpersonal relationships and social standing, Martha's comes from having too many individuals sharing a single toilet. Yet both individuals' experiences provide insight into the complexity of the relationships surrounding sanitation provision. These experiences suggest that any facility provided in complex social milieus, such as Barcelona, have to consider that working on the basis of crude ratios of toilets to households or of proximity to facilities is insufficient, as this fails to recognise residents' own perceptions of ownership and custody and the social relations associated with these perceptions.

FINDING AN ALTERNATIVE

The quality of services available to residents was a recurring theme in many interviews. Kenilwe, a young mother living with her husband and two small children presented a narrative similar to that of many other residents who have



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chosen to construct and use pit latrines rather than the container toilets. In her case a container toilet which she shared with her neighbour was located less than 5 m from the back of her house, but it was inconveniently placed for servicing. Since it was 'hidden' behind a neighbour's house and off the main path, it was often skipped and left full and dirty.

Kenilwe's response has been to remove the container toilet from its concrete stall and to have her husband dig a pit latrine alongside their home, covering it with a corrugated iron structure attached to their house. Her next-door neighbour has followed suit. Following negotiations it was decided that Kenilwe would keep the container toilet while her husband would assist their neighbour to dig the neighbour's pit latrine.

After their pit latrine was established, Kenilwe cut out the bottom out of the existing container so it could serve as a seat for the pit latrine, leaving the existing concrete structure standing empty. The concrete structure next to it is also empty; it now supports a satellite dish while still being used as a crude urinal.

According to Kenilwe, her pit latrine was a "much better" form of sanitation than the container toilet since it required no servicing or emptying, and therefore stank less

than the container toilet. She also preferred the fact that it belonged to her family – they did not have to share it with anyone. By rejecting the container toilets and digging their own pit latrines, many residents of Barcelona have taken responsibility for their own sanitation.

MAIN FINDINGS

Each of the examples noted above provides a unique perspective on Barcelona's current level and quality of sanitation provision. Common to each experience is some degree of dissatisfaction with the current municipal services and facilities. But the sources of that dissatisfaction vary widely and reflect a large range of factors. They include, among others, the physical location of the resident's house in relation to sanitation, the social relationships between residents and their neighbours, the number of residents sharing a facility, residents' ability to provide themselves with alternatives and, finally, general dissatisfaction with servicing and maintenance of the provided facilities.

Residents' reactions to these challenges are also noteworthy, ranging as they do from appropriating public toilets and padlocking them to rejecting these toilets completely and digging their own pit latrines.

During each interview a planned pilot sanitation project was explained to respondents. Each explicitly expressed a preference for a full flush system, although some had reservations regarding the location of the pilot project's toilet blocks, and the fact that they would be communal. Once the pilot project toilets have been installed, the project team aims to revisit the settlement with the same approach to record the experiences, including problems, associated with the pilot sanitation system. It is hoped that such research will assist in the improved planning and execution of future sanitation services.

This research outlined above suggests that, if service providers carefully consider the manner in which recipients relate to provided services, they will be able to better understand the factors that are often neglected in favour of solely technology approaches.

Documenting people's on-the-ground experiences offer insight into a range of possibilities which should be taken into account when planning and providing a sanitation service that is explicitly based on a 'people-centred approach'.

- This article is based on a paper originally presented at the WISA 2012 Biennial conference. □

These concrete structures have been left empty by residents taking the container toilets inside for use as seating in their own privately-dug pit latrines.