

The absence of toilets remains one of the leading causes of illness and death among children

Lack of roadside loos leaves filth, disease

By Owen Wagabaza and George Bitu

There comes a time when one has to answer that call of nature. So, what does one do when the urge is unbearable and they are on the highway? Would the nearby bush be the only saviour to dash into, regardless of class and status? Many times, the nearby vegetation is the only option to save the day.

"In Uganda, some people behave as if urination and defecation are not routine bodily functions, but somehow optional, especially when they are away from their homes. Many roads are designed without washrooms as though people using such roads will never need them," Daniel Oboda, a regular highway user, says.

Toilets on highways should be given priority because they are essential for an inclusive, healthy society.

This is particularly true as the population ages and more and more people live with chronic health conditions.

A number of health issues affect bodily functions, including diabetes, colorectal cancer, irritable bowel syndrome, prostatitis, shingles, stroke and dementia, not to mention the regular needs of children, pregnant, as well as menstruating women.

Communities at risk

Some 20km out of Iganga town, a bus from Kampala heading to Mbale makes a stopover and the passengers rush out, one after another, to answer nature's call. Rarely do vehicles travelling long distances go through this stretch at Bukoona village without stopping for those aboard to answer nature's call.

With volumes of urine as well as faecal matter landing uncontrollably on a daily basis, the area currently reeks



A bodaboda rides past the Nature Call Centre under construction at Bukoona in Iganga



Passengers from a Kotido-bound bus to ease themselves at Nyakwae village, Abim district



Motorists stop near River Mpologoma in Kibuku district to ease themselves in the nearby bushes

VIEWS

People's lives at risk from vice



Daphrose Kamagara, a resident of Biguli sub-county in Kamwenge district

Contractors should set up washrooms on the roads they construct. It would help stop the practice of defecating in bushes.



Samuel Emeru, the WASH programme manager for Karamoja sub-region

The Karamoja area has been faced with cases of open defecation for long. This is only made worse by lack of toilets on the highways.



Isaac Mwaka, the Abim district water officer
Excreta from travellers gets washed into water sources, especially when it rains. This puts lives of people at risk of disease, such as diarrhoea, dysentery and cholera.



Annet Kekibura, a resident of Bwiizi village in Kamwenge district
It is a shameful practice to dump excreta anywhere. Motorists should plan to stop at places with public toilets as they travel.

of human excreta. One cannot pass by that place without holding one's breath.

At Kitantalo village in Kibuku district, the situation is not any better. At a secluded bushy spot adjacent to River Mpologoma, stop-overs to answer the call of nature are common.

"I stay by the roadside and watch as the bushland is turned into a washroom. Over 45 cars stop here on a daily basis. Our only fear is that travellers are leaving us with all kinds of diseases. During the rainy season, the excreta is washed into the nearby river after downpours," Geoffrey Kiisa, a resident, says.

At Kabuhoke village on the Kabale-Kisoro road, Dirisa Manishiimwe, a resident, says it is only by God's mercy that they are still alive.

"We do not know why, but bus drivers cannot pass by without stopping here for passengers to answer calls of nature," a worried Manishiimwe says.

Dr Ivan Mukisa, the Butaleja district health officer, says when many people are defecating outdoors, it is difficult to avoid ingesting human waste via open water sources.

"This is either because it finds its way into food or water supplies or because it has been spread by flies. Just

WOMEN AT HIGHER RISK

■ According to the UN Millennium Project report, inadequate sanitation puts a greater burden on women than men. "The major impact of poor and inadequate sanitation includes diseases, such as diarrhoea. Women look at inadequacy beyond disease. They are deprived of their right to dignity, privacy and safety," the report partly reads.

last year, six people died of cholera majorly as a result of water contamination," Mukisa says.

According to the joint UNICEF and the World Health Organisation 2014 report, the absence of toilets remains one of the leading causes of illness and death among children. The report indicated that diarrhoea, which is often associated with poor sanitary conditions and respiratory infections resulting from poor hygiene, kills about 400,000 children under the age of five worldwide annually.

Heavy burden to women

According to the UN Millennium Project report, inadequate sanitation puts a greater burden on women

than men.

"Although there is common knowledge that the major impact of poor and inadequate sanitation includes diseases, such as diarrhoea, women look at inadequacy beyond disease. They are deprived of their right to dignity, privacy and safety," the report partly reads.

Aside from risking rape, women need well-equipped toilet facilities with rubbish bins for the disposal of used menstrual pads and water for washing.

"The absence of washrooms on highways, therefore, is demoralising and deprives a woman of her dignity. Needless to say, a toilet is considered a vital component in managing menstrual periods," Nancy Mulindwa, a woman activist, says.

Mark Ssali, the head of communications and corporate affairs at Uganda National Roads Authority (UNRA), argues that although the agency is aware of the importance of toilets on highways, they have not been able to construct them because of sustainability challenges.

"Whatever UNRA does, must have a sustainability plan and the same goes for toilets. Setting up a toilet is not expensive, but that is before you factor in the

costly maintenance, such as manpower and utilities, like water and power," says Ssali.

Way forward

Ssali reveals that they are drafting a clear policy framework that will enable the agency partner with private individuals to set up wellness centres in different spots of the highways.

"We want them to be wellness centres, so that travellers not only stop for calls of nature, but can also buy refreshments and this will help in sustainably managing the centres," Ssali explains.

As the Government looks forward to achieving Vision 2020, sanitation and hygiene ought to be given the necessary attention, for it is a vital tool for improving the lives of millions of people. It is, therefore, imperative upon the Government, at every level, to invest more in the provision of water and public toilets and create awareness on the dangers of open defecation.

One such facility is already under construction at Bukoona village, near Iganga town in Iganga district.

Godfrey Mudangha, the manager of the place, discloses that the private enterprise would not only offer 20 washrooms, but also restaurant services for travellers on a 24-hour basis.