

By Jeje Muhinde;

In the rural sectors of Kayonza district, Eastern Rwanda, open defecation and unimproved sanitation is still one of the challenges faced by households.

Lack of readily accessible toilets by some of the households has exposed people to infectious diseases and terrible odors, while others are left to relieve themselves outside in places like fields, bushes, forests, roadsides and open spaces.

In this remote rural area, some people who do not have access to a hygienic toilet and a place to wash their hands are exposed to an array of faecally transmissible and potentially deadly diseases that with improved sanitation are easily preventable.



A pit latrine toilet like this can be risky to users which also encourages the use of open defecation

Where there is open defecation, pathogens spread quickly, causing diarrhoea, cholera, bilharzia (caused by freshwater worms) and other diseases, according to health officials.

Donatha Mukamabo head of social affairs at Gahini sector says that the practice of Open Defecation is due to lack of access to proper sanitation.

She says that it's a cliché that people squat among the few trees and bushes along the pathway tracks and defecate in the open with no dignity and privacy.

"Access to sanitation is a challenge that the district is tackling at the household level, some households have been offered some cash incentives to subsidize the construction of latrines for some of the vulnerable households through different organizations." she said.

Following a number of joint interventions by local administrative officials and stakeholders, some 51 villages were pre-declared as open defecation free (ODF) out of 137 villages in eight districts of Rwanda.

Achieving sustainable sanitation is one of the targets entailed in the development blueprint of the 2020 Government Economic Recovery Plan that left 7,078 households without latrines.

Sanitation shared by more than one household

Some of these households in rural sectors of Mwiri, Rukara, Ruramira, Rwinkwavu and Gahini in Kayonza district share latrines and hand washing is rarely practiced mainly because of water uncertainties.

Some of the latrines are traumatizing to use due to water shortages, others are utterly poorly built that you can look through and see the inside of the pit.

Children often avoid using them for fear of falling in; other latrines don't have slabs and are shared by multiple households.

Rwanda Rural Sanitation Activity (Isuku Iwacu) in partnership with The United States Agency for International Development (USAID), created a private sector driven approach to engage existing and potential actors within the sanitation space to bolster Rwanda's sanitation private sector and the sanitation market broadly.

Such actors include potential entrepreneurs with an interest in starting businesses selling improved sanitation products; establishing vendors looking to expand their retail products lines.

The project has engaged existing and potential private sector actors such as SATO-Rwanda or safe toilets.



The signature SATO toilet (Safe-Toilets) is a blue plastic toilet pan placed directly over a single pit. The toilet pan features an automatically-closing trap door that blocks odor and insects.

Low-flush toilets

It uses a small amount of water (0.2 to 1 liter) when cleaning; they have the uniqueness of a trap door that automatically opens and closes tightly after use.

Cyrus Ntaganira from SATO-Rwanda say's that the toilets are unique in a way that they don't require much water while cleaning them and they don't attract flies.



Cyrus Ntaganira explaining the usefulness of SATO products

“SATO toilets are made of plastics, they have the uniqueness of a trap door that automatically opens and closes itself. They are particularly self-sealed or unsealed after use. Among others, these toilets allow immediate flow of disposed waste and do not require much water while cleaning that one cup is enough. “He said, adding that they started operating in Rwanda in 2017; today they’re working with more than 300 retail hardware shops countrywide however he was reticent about the number of units they’ve sold.

Clean and safe

SATO-Rwanda has donated these products to schools in Bugesera district to help improve hygiene and use standard facilities. They are a solution to parents worried that their children might fall into the pit toilets because they have tiny holes.

They explain that it is a new innovation has come to improve the livelihood and sanitation of households.

“People are dying because of lack of water and poor sanitation, we believe Sato can play a role to try and enhance and make better societies” Ntaganira stresses.

Experience from Gahini Hospital in Rwanda where they are installed, indicates that the Safe toilets are unique in a way that you simply pour in water while cleaning them, the self-opening and sealing mechanisms unlike others helps the toilet to remain clean and safe, they don’t accommodate flies and odor .

Eric Munkuzi a cleaner at the hospital says “Before, the other toilets attracted flies as they were not sealed. These installed Sato plastic toilets prevent flies and smell since they have locks. They’re a solution to household sanitation because they can be kept clean.”

“They provide a solution to patients worried about open pit toilets, in this hospital we have patients, staff like doctors and nurses who use our stance of toilets so proper hygiene is key to avoid a multitude of adverse effects such as infections,” he explained.

Mihigo further says that these toilets have been a huge solution for the disabled patients too.

Emmanuel Rutayisire, a healthy community worker at Nyagatabire village says not having an accessible basic toilet is one of the causes of ODF.

“We are seeing a change in such curious and skewed cultural attitudes; people have to understand why it’s unhealthy to leave fecal matter lying around. We believe using such Sato toilets is part of the solution, they are safe, clean and small and they eliminate the risk of children falling into the pit.” he adds.

Solutions to water-related diseases

Like most residents in Gahini, fifty-two year old Evode Nirere, a father of four children, says that they used not to visit their toilet at night since it was made with wooden rods laid across but not a cemented slab.

Located meters away from their house, the latrine emitted an unpleasant odor and allowed flies to easily come into contact with human waste. However he says that after ordering and installing Satotoilets, the family is beaming with pride.

“We often suffered from water borne diseases like diarrhea, but now with an improved toilet, life is changing. We do not wake up to dispose of buckets of waste in bushes as it was before” he explained.

Nirere’s fifteen year- old daughter Jeanine Isaro says before, she used to go to a private location to finish her business since the latrine was shameful, and not safe to use. She now has faith in the toilet because it is hygienically and comfortable to use.

Nirere’s home improved toilet is now a role model for the village and relatives from other villages who visit and go away inspired to construct the same for their households.

 Evode Nirere managed to build another toilet because the old one pictured was very old and risky for the family to use.

Rutayisire is concerned, not all residents can afford the rare safe and sustainable solution toilets.

Lydia Irabagiza a widow in her early 60’s in Mwiri Sector says she can’t afford installing such modern toilets later on fixing her falling latrine.

“At the moment, I’m unable to install the Safe toilet because of the coronavirus disruptions. I’m not able to sell my crops because we have to remain with

food on our own," She explains.

SATO Rwanda underlines that the biggest challenge today is adapting to the new sanitation innovations, as well as a national awareness and sanitation campaign about safe toilets as solution to sanitation problems in Rwanda.

Safe-Toilets like that of SATO are rare in villages; they're still new products which can't easily be found in hardware shops except Kigali and a few towns. They can be sold at different prices depending on the retailer, A Sato Pan costs Rwf 8,000, Sato flex toilets cost Rwf 12,000 and Sato stool is priced at Rwf 15,000.



The price of the Toilet is only one component, the cost increases from Rwf 60,000 to 70,000 since it requires a cement slab to keep the Pan in place as well as a stall that houses that toilet.

Apart from the higher initial costs for these modern toilets which come with options to use less water, provide a number of disadvantages, local residents also say these facilities require more scrubbing and cleaning to remain well maintained when compared to traditional toilets.

Edouard Niyonkuru, a farmer from Kayonza district said that one cannot dismiss rural habits quite so simply because of the old practice of open defecation in some remote rural villages.

"There are challenges associated with the costs involved in maintaining these modern toilets and not every villager can afford to cater," the father of four remarked. (End)