

# Walking down the forbidden lane: 'shit talk' promotes sanitation

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## Introduction

One in four children die before their fifth birthday in Sierra Leone, many as a result of poor sanitation and hygiene, leading to diarrhoea. Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) is a new approach to sanitation which shocks people into changing their sanitation behaviour. CLTS was introduced by Plan and other organisations in Sierra Leone in 2008. But many people, including policy makers and community members, have not felt comfortable discussing people having to shit in the village in the way that CLTS methodology requires. Using the local terminology for shit, for example, *kaka*, *kpuui*, *kpona* and *enim* has shocked people of both high and low income groups. But the approach seeks to bring about a change in sanitation behaviour through challenging taboos and cultural beliefs which implicitly encourage and promote open defecation (OD) in communities.

I have worked with rural communities

for 15 years and recently as Community Empowerment Advisor for Plan Sierra Leone. Over the years, I have learnt that behaviour change in small villages is sometimes very slow and can take many years. But with the CLTS approach, it has been a revelation that behaviour change can happen fast. I found out that the same people who are used to openly defecating – shitting – in the open can suddenly express shock about this bad habit and health menace, and decide to change it. It is the words we use to describe the shit, the many questions we ask villagers about shit, the stories, proverbs, parables, songs, religious quotes etc. which cause the jolt. Plan, government and other organisations in Sierra Leone have used the CLTS approach to change the way thousands of people view the effects of OD and come together to take action. As a result, 300 villages have been declared open defecation free (ODF) in Sierra Leone and many more are preparing to achieve this status.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Open Defecation Free (ODF) communities, every household has a latrine constructed and open defecation is not practiced by any member of the community.

In this article, I will talk about the power of using ‘shit’ language, the taboos and beliefs surrounding shit and how communities have worked together to overcome them in their toil to become ODF. The article also delves into the different skills facilitators have used to help people talk and break away from their cultural barriers to change their sanitation behaviour.

### Silence and the power of language

Generally, there is silence about shit. This is mostly associated with local beliefs and the taboos surrounding it. Using the word ‘shit’ is considered vulgar and inappropriate, but there are also more entrenched values and beliefs which create barriers for using the raw language. One of the most common is the belief that talking about shit brings bad luck. Openly using the words like *kaka*, *kpuui*, *enim* and *bom* is so offensive to the ears that it is believed to be responsible for any ill luck that follows. Openly discussing shit is viewed as indecent and forbidden in many villages. Women and elders have been the most reluctant to use the word shit in their local languages – or to further discuss where they shit, how much shit they produce and how the shit moves to their mouth. However, our experience confirms that it is the use of strong and vulgar language that creates the best results in achieving ODF status and sustaining total sanitation in our communities. We have also realised that consistent use of the most unpleasant words for shit have created an enabling environment for accepting CLTS as a preferred approach in organisations, and a recipe for changing sanitation behaviour in communities.

### The beliefs and taboos

*Shit gathered in the same place kills and brings bad luck to the village.*

A community leader in Bakeh Curve, Koya Chiefdom, Port Loko District.

Some of the communities we meet in the south and northern parts of Sierra Leone believe that one should not sit over someone else’s shit because it will lead to bad luck. It is also believed in some parts of Sierra Leone that an initiated man or woman should not sit over the shit of a non-initiate.<sup>2</sup> Because of these beliefs, the idea of building latrines is not always welcome. It is also a common belief in the southern and eastern parts of Sierra Leone that anyone who falls into a latrine will either die, go mad or never again be sober. As a result of this belief, the weak (children, the elderly and disabled) are prevented from using the latrine for fear of them falling in. It is also common to hear women say children’s faeces are not dangerous and therefore should not disgust mothers. This has been one of the factors responsible for the spread of diarrhoea in households, as mothers hardly wash their hands after cleaning children’s shit. People also believe that in-laws should not shit in the same place, as this causes loss of respect in the family. Pregnant women should not use latrines for fear of losing their unborn babies. The heat from latrines can also make people sick (but yet is good for ripening bananas!).

### Facilitation for change

#### Triggering and post-triggering

To overcome some of these beliefs and barriers, Plan and other CLTS facilitators and workers are using many techniques at triggering and post-triggering stages to ensure openness in shit discussions, at central and local government level, and during community action to achieve sanitation for all. The CLTS approach provides opportunities for innovative triggering techniques like using proverbs, parables, wise words, tales, stories, religious quotes and concepts, humour, laughter, songs and dances by facilitators. We have experienced

<sup>2</sup> Initiates are members of secret societies in the community.

successful 'talking' during triggering in Plan operational areas in Sierra Leone.<sup>3</sup>

### Songs

In a newly triggered village we used a well loved local Loko song to summon people to the introduction meeting before triggering.<sup>4</sup> The village is big and mobilising villagers was very difficult. The song '*Babaeyo Babay*' (meaning come to us, come all) is so popular and well loved that when sung, it brought women, children and men together in a heated dance to the meeting immediately. The song was also a good ice-breaker for discussing shit. Plan Sierra Leone facilitators discovered that the more communities feel comfortable talking and laughing about shit, the better the outcomes of the triggering. 'How do you feel when you are singing this shit song?' Briwa asked a teenage girl leading the children to the reflection meeting in Fakunya, Moyamba District. 'I don't like the song but singing it will force my father to build a latrine in the yard,' was the reply.

We have also used songs spontaneously created by children during and after triggering. Most of the songs denounce OD and describe the ills associated with it. The children are always encouraged to sing their shit songs during the ignition moment while the whole community is reflecting on their bad sanitation practices.<sup>5</sup> The sudden shock created by the shit songs causes further embarrassment for the community and especially the elders. They often immediately ask the children to stop. But the children continue and this prompts them to start talking and plan their next

actions. In one village in Kenema (eastern Sierra Leone), the children and natural leaders shouted so hard during the singing that the town chief, who had been one of the quietest villagers during the triggering sessions, burst into laughter.<sup>6</sup> He ordered everyone to come together and make a plan of action for the construction of their latrines.

### Humour

Due to the many taboos around faeces, sometimes people keep quiet for the first hour of triggering. This is normally when facilitators help communities do their defecation area mapping, calculation of shit, calculation of medical expenses and faecal-oral transmission route analysis.<sup>7</sup> We use funny expressions and utterances like: '*Kaka na kaka, big wan, small wan, na the same foot den get for waka go na chop or wata.*' (meaning, 'A shit is a shit, big shit or small shit, they all have legs and feet that move them to food and water!').<sup>8</sup> Community people start laughing or giggling quietly as soon as you start using the local word for shit. This expression is often used to show them that even infant faecal material is dangerous and can lead to diarrhoea. Facilitators would often say:

- 'Oh, you see how big that shit is, it must be coming from a big bottom. This can't be a child's!'
- 'What colour is that shit, is it a maize, bulgur, wheat or rice shit?'
- 'Oh, that shit looks very smooth, did the person eat potatoes?'
- 'Hey, your shit is so plenty, it has taken all the space on the map!'

<sup>3</sup> 'Talking' in this sense means openly and confidently – discussing open defecation and faeces/shit business.

<sup>4</sup> Loko is an ethnic group and language spoken in Sierra Leone.

<sup>5</sup> The ignition moment is the moment of collective realisation that due to open defecation all are ingesting each others' faeces and that this will continue as long as open defecation goes on. See also Tips for trainers, this issue.

<sup>6</sup> Natural leaders are men, women, youth, children or elderly who surface during or after triggering sessions in villages. They have an interest in the CLTS process and promote the construction, innovation and spread of CLTS in other villages.

<sup>7</sup> These are all triggering exercises carried out with communities to bring out the elements of fear, shame and disgust which ignite them to stop open defecation and build their own latrines. See also Tips for trainers, this issue.

<sup>8</sup> *Kaka* means 'shit' in Krio, a local language/lingua franca spoken by 97% of Sierra Leoneans.

• ‘So whose shit is this, and why is it so black or red?’

These funny expressions usually ‘break the ice’ and the laughter helps start the talking.

### Religion

Because our communities are predominantly Muslim, we often discuss the role of sanitation in religion. Quranic quotations and ideas are used during triggering. The common notion of ‘Cleanliness is next to Godliness’, is in line with the teachings of Prophet Mohammed (peace and blessings be upon him – PBH) who encouraged his followers to keep their surroundings clean and to maintain good personal hygiene. When communities realise the implications of open defecation, they fear that they are offending God by not adhering to the teachings of the Prophet and experience a feeling of shame when they realise they are worshipping in an unclean environment. Many of our people have a strong belief in the readings in the Quran. Citing verses like ‘God loves those... who keep themselves pure’ (2:222); ‘God loves those who purify themselves’ (9:109) and ‘Cleanliness is half of Faith; it fills the scales of good actions’ – the utterance of Allah (Al-hamdu lillah – all praise belongs to Allah) – have been most effective in making people realise and talk about the evil of open defecation and how it contaminates their ablutions and prayers. Facilitators have also emphasised that the Prophet’s (PBH) teachings tell that women should keep their genitals clean using pure water (which is not contaminated by faeces or urine). Women take this issue very seriously and this helps to trigger them. It is also believed that one should not shit near the mosque or church as it offends God. Once communities are ignited, they also add to the list of quotations and beliefs. The story of a prayerful but untidy man who was led to a poorly built house and another who was prayerful and clean, and who was accepted in God’s mansion in heaven, was once told by an Imam (religious leader) in a



Photo: Mariama Zombo

**A girl makes a commitment on behalf of children to stop open defecation during an ODF celebration in Mabayo village.**

village we triggered. It is often used now to create fear of being unclean through open defecation.

### Using community knowledge

Facilitators have discovered that despite the taboos, communities possess a wealth of knowledge on sanitation and hygiene, which we can draw from during and after triggering. The knowledge is conveyed through statements, adages, parables, stories, quotes, and humorous expressions by the community people themselves during or after triggering. Facilitators use these to further trigger and document them for future use.

During a CLTS triggering training in Mabayo village in Bombali District, one of the elders among the trainees noted that ‘...God himself does not like dirt and faeces particularly’. When asked why, the old man went on to say

*The soil is made up of rotten debris, including faeces. So when God made food like cassava, He gave it two protective covers which we peel before eating the pure white and clean tuber.<sup>9</sup> He did so to protect the cassava from the dirty soil. Every food*

*grown has a protective coat, so why should we not protect the food He has given us? Therefore, whenever your food drops on the ground, do wash it with clean water before eating it. This is the wish of Allah.*

Every participant was quiet for a while and more discussions on the importance of good sanitation and hygiene ensued.

There is no dearth of knowledge in communities. But our people must be triggered to remember and practice good sanitation and hygiene. This happens when we give time and space to communities to talk about their own knowledge and remember what their forefathers used to tell them. CLTS facilitators should continue talking and holding discussions even after triggering, to help communities analyse the issues that will take them up the sanitation ladder. It is evident that they examine some of the beliefs and taboos in their post-triggering meetings, at family level, and resolve to ignore them and move forward with their plans to construct and use latrines. Sometimes, the youth and women are the first to put the beliefs aside and take action. But in other cases, the elders and community leaders (who are respected and feared) would give their people confidence to put their taboos behind them and work for their well-being.

'Do you eat *enim*/shit?' I asked the village chief in Kalangba, Port Loko District. He gazed at me in shock and paused for a moment. Then he said, 'My daughter, I suddenly realise it is true, yes I do, because I believe that when my enemy shits in the village, I eat his *enim*. This has to stop. I will encourage everyone in the village to build latrines so that we will stop eating our enemies' *enim*'.

#### Gender and CLTS

During the training in Mabayo village in Bombali District, there was also another



Photo: Mariama Zombo

**A woman draws her village defecation area map in a triggering session in Northern Sierra Leone.**

comment by an elderly male natural leader from Masantigie Village in Bombali which interested me.

*We must respect our mothers, wives and daughters by providing them with a suthra house.<sup>10</sup>*

Many of the men we have had contact with during trainings and triggering sessions have expressed the need to show respect for women's privacy and personal hygiene. When triggered, this strong feeling is expressed and put into practice by immediately constructing their latrines, with a bathroom in most cases. In many parts of Sierra Leone, women and girls are considered as 'assets' and the 'weaker sex'. Families (especially men) therefore have a responsibility to protect them and make them comfortable. The religious and cultural context (Islam and Christianity) also sets the enabling environment for the respect and protection of women and girls. When facilitators trigger men into action, they suddenly realise that the dignity of women with regards to sanitation has to be respected by providing a latrine and a shower or bath house. Using religion in the triggering sessions sometimes ignites this sudden realisation and subsequent action by the men.

<sup>9</sup> Cassava is a root tuber which is eaten in Sierra Leone.

<sup>10</sup> *Suthra* in Loko means a facility for cleaning and offers privacy for someone e.g. a latrine/bathroom.

Photo: Mariama Zombo



**A young man starts digging his household latrine hole after triggering.**

The focus on women is intentional. They are usually too shy to talk about shit. However, facilitators encourage women to come forward and be part of the process, because women are responsible for cleaning their homes, disposing of children's faeces, cleaning latrines and providing water for the home. Engaging women in CLTS in their communities is one of the best ways in sustaining total sanitation. Once they realise that they are eating shit, they convince their husbands and other menfolk to take action. Sustaining ODF in villages actually means more work but a better life for women. Women have reported that they prefer to clean the latrine than to go to the bush to defecate. They also prefer to smell fresh air than to have open smelly faeces behind the yard or in the compound.

In a post-triggering follow-up visit, I held discussions with some women from Tabe, an ODF village in Moyamba District. A woman who had been listening keenly to the conversations concluded by saying:

*The grass is a friend of shit but the clean yard is an enemy. If a child expresses the desire to shit, the mother immediately carries him/her to the nearby grass/bush, not the clean yard where all can see the shit. When a mother or grandmother happens to see shit in the open yard, she will clean it up immediately and throw it away in the*

*grass. I have therefore decided to continue cleaning my backyard to avoid grass growing in the compound.*

## Challenges

A few communities we triggered refused to build their latrines. Some people told us that they cannot build 'kaka stores', meaning latrines, and add more bad luck to their communities. To further trigger these communities into action, the facilitators and neighbouring ODF villages invited them to their ODF celebrations. The celebrations are a source of honour and fame for the ODF villages and this became a driving force for those communities who were still practicing OD. Three months after the celebrations, three villages built all their household latrines and started using them.

Some of the taboos and beliefs in our communities are now overcome through CLTS, and more meetings, discussions, talking and positive actions are being taken by villagers in ODF communities. But even though the silence about open defecation and its bad sanitation effects is now broken, we still have the challenge of maintaining a 'high level' of total sanitation. The question of whether ODF communities (in the long term) will maintain their newly constructed latrines, build new ones when the pits collapse or get full, continue their good sanitation habits and practices, and make sanitation a priority on their development agenda is still unanswered. We are also confronted with other challenges. Will communities upgrade their latrines to a more hygienic state? Or practice hand-washing after using the latrine? Will teams of natural leaders be able to replicate and scale up CLTS? Will we be able to achieve total sanitation as a sustainable outcome? Plan, other partners and community members are trying out several initiatives to maintain and sustain good sanitation habits in communities.

One community in Moyamba complained that they have loose and sandy soil and are worried that during the raining

season, their latrine pits may collapse. The natural leaders from this community were selected by Plan to attend a local artisans training, which focused on creativity and designing local latrine seats using cement and broken tiles. As well as the training, they held discussions with natural leaders and artisans about their concerns and learnt how to design better latrine holes in sandy areas. Plan also brings together natural leaders, school health clubs, and water and sanitation (WATSAN) committee members to share experiences on disseminating hygiene messages after achieving ODF, how to do simple latrine maintenance (especially during the rains), and how to ensure communities maintain total sanitation.

Moreover, achieving ODF in a few hundred villages does not suffice. We must work towards attaining ODF chiefdoms, districts, regions and a country free of OD. But the spread and scaling up of CLTS depends on government and institutional acceptance and support. In working to change mindsets to ensure the scaling up and spread of the CLTS approach, we have been challenged by government officials and other non-governmental organisations about the quality, durability and sustainability of latrines built by communities. We have also created discomfort through the language we use in engaging government authorities and senior staff in institutions. This has sometimes become a recipe for other people rejecting and trivialising the approach. For example, one senior district health management team officer (DHMT) in Sierra Leone said,

*Why do you like using the term kaka? This is not a decent language to use. In fact, the latrines you talk about are not durable... the sticks will not last long and this poses a risk for the people. I cannot support your CLTS!*

An enthusiastic Plan CLTS facilitator once sent a report to a senior manager to review. The manager's angry response was:



Photo: Mariama Zombo

**A youth talks about his latrine design in a planning meeting.**

*Would you rather use a nicer word instead of kaka? This is too raw... please review the language used...*

The facilitator replied:

*Dear sir, it is the shock in the word that changes lives.*

The manager was more accommodating after that.

At the national level, there is a CLTS task force of NGOs and practitioners, which is headed by the Ministry of Health and Sanitation. Plan Sierra Leone belongs to this task force. The task force is responsible for coordination of CLTS activities in the country and monitors them using tools developed by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), NGOs and government. Strategically, the task force has faced challenges related to some senior government and NGO officials who seek to trivialise CLTS and who do not want to talk about open defecation because they view this as indecent. The task force still raises its 'voice', talking more about shit at every opportunity and forum, and working together with the government of Sierra Leone to advocate for central government and district council support for the CLTS methodology through resource allocation to scale up and speed up the process.

## Conclusion

CLTS is now viewed as an entry point in marginalised communities by Plan Sierra Leone. It is a big opportunity for communities to open up, talk and change. One of the positive outcomes of CLTS are related to a special feeling of confidence and dignity which communities experience and the beginning of a fresh 'life' and way of doing development in villages.

In the last two years, we have learnt that helping people view shitty discussions as not vulgar, indecent, forbidden and embar-

rassing is an important and major step in achieving open defecation free villages, in harnessing institutional support for CLTS and in scaling up and replicating the approach. It is also crucial to note that while cultural barriers in the form of taboos and general beliefs could hinder, in other cases these have actually helped to facilitate the CLTS process. It all depends on the quality of facilitation in the triggering and post-triggering processes, facilitators' creativity, tact, intuitiveness and initiatives as they use their 'best judgement' in communities.

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