

Sanitation in developing cities: from politics to policies

Laure Criqui (IDDRI)

Sanitation is the poor relation of basic services¹: the issue receives far less attention, along with political and financial means, than access to drinking water. And yet, 2.4 billion people in the world do not have access to basic sanitation facilities. Furthermore, local and international action has been particularly focused on rural areas; and therefore the situation regarding urban sanitation is less controlled, which is a major challenge given the exponential rate of urbanization in developing countries.

Improving sanitation systems in developing cities requires urgent and radical mobilization to mitigate the rising cost of inaction in terms of public health, environmental pollution, and even urban attractiveness. The community of expertise on the subject has been conducting international advocacy work since the 1990s, and is developing technical solutions, business models and participatory methods to improve hygiene practices, and to develop tools to support public decision-making. A number of pilot projects are proving successful, but there remains a problem in terms of scaling up.

Indeed, sanitation is still perceived as culturally stigmatised, technically complex, financially costly and therefore politically unattractive. There is a gap between promising innovations and the lack of ownership by decision makers. The complexity therefore relates both to putting the issue on the agenda and also to implementing the operational solutions. To address this challenge, it is necessary to open the black box of political decision-making, and to identify the incentives and mechanisms that can and must position sanitation as a key issue for sustainable urban development policies.

1. Urban essential services include water, sanitation, waste management, energy and mobility.

KEY MESSAGES

- The implementation of technical, commercial and social solutions is not sufficient to put the subject of sanitation in developing cities onto the political agenda. There remains a lack of attractive politico-institutional scenarios to mobilize and guide public decision-making, and to combine technical and economic feasibility, social and public benefits, and institutional arrangements.
- Designing a quality urban sanitation service requires the integration of many utility providers who offer various services. The role of public authorities in coordinating and regulating these services still needs to be established, specifically for hybrid but integrated urban sanitation systems.
- Feedback and recommendations on creating an enabling politico-institutional environment to get the issue of sanitation onto the political agenda are in their infancy. The link between the conditions for political support and policy instruments has yet to be built.
- Many questions remain unanswered regarding how to better inform public decision-making, especially in terms of the interests and interactions of the actors in the sector, and the incentives and institutions that should be established to encourage and facilitate their cooperation throughout the chain.

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Institut du développement durable
et des relations internationales
27, rue Saint-Guillaume
75337 Paris cedex 07 France

ADVANCES IN THE URBAN SANITATION DEBATE

An international community of expertise has been mobilized since the 1990s and, gradually, the approach towards urban sanitation systems has been improved (Rosenqvist, Mitchell & Willetts, 2016):

- from access to toilets to the integrated management of all stages in the sanitation chain (access, storage, collection, disposal, treatment, valorization);
- from ecological sanitation focused on wastewater to sustainable sanitation, integrating the dimensions of social and economic acceptability, technical and institutional appropriateness, and environmental protection;
- from an approach in terms of sanitation infrastructure to one in terms of a service for the population and integrated sanitation system.

Furthermore, far from the conventional sewerage model, which is unrealistic in the context of rapid urbanization and constrained public capacities, this international community supports the idea that alternative, decentralized and autonomous solutions are necessary, feasible and sustainable. Numerous utility providers of varying size and status, distributed throughout the chain, drive these solutions forward. Consequently, the challenge is not to find “the” best technological solution, but to technically, financially and institutionally link together a variety of solutions in an inclusive and sustainable urban sanitation system at the scale of the city.

However, the deployment of sanitation services in developing cities faces specific challenges:

- rapid, largely unplanned, urbanization, with precarious settlements and populations for which sanitation is not automatically regarded as a priority, particularly compared to access to water and electricity;
- urban density and congestion that is prone to contamination and epidemics, aggravated by the lack of sanitation and that has an impact on public health for the entire city;
- responsibilities for sanitation that are divided between institutions in charge of urban planning, water, the environment, health, etc., and also between different levels of government, from local to national;
- the persistence of a model and aspiration for conventional centralized sewers, despite its unsuitability in terms of the available technical and financial capacities and the urban fabric;
- pilot projects and entrepreneurial initiatives, particularly in peri-urban settlements, that face difficulties in terms of upscaling, equitable

access throughout the territory, and coverage of the entire sanitation chain, due to a lack of sectoral regulation.

Under these conditions, business-as-usual will not enable the sustainable and inclusive urban development goals to be met. It therefore seems certain that alternative solutions, or even a paradigm shift, will be essential. There are growing calls for the development of an approach for “city-wide inclusive sanitation”,² particularly by working to encourage an institutional environment that is favourable to innovation and public regulation. These latter ideas thus adopt a political economy approach of urban sanitation, to understand and encourage the emergence of sanitation as a priority for political and public action. The aim is to introduce the notion of the local project management and ownership of such systems, which highlights the fundamentally political dimension of urban sanitation.

ACTORS AND ADVOCACY DISCOURSE

To bring change to the situation, the community of expertise on sanitation has structured itself. Beginning in the 1990s, it successfully led the United Nations to declare 2008 as the International Year of Sanitation. Target 6.2 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, adopted in 2015) is dedicated to improving the whole sanitation sector – and not only access to toilets. Meanwhile, four international conferences on faecal sludge management and autonomous sanitation have brought specialists together, and an information and exchange platform, the *Sustainable Sanitation Alliance* (SuSanA)³, attracts more than 9,000 members on its online forum. The most committed actors, who collaborate to inform decision-making and action, include:

- donors and international institutions: the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Program, the UN Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, the German GIZ cooperation, etc.;
- NGOs that combine the implementation of pilot projects, research action, advocacy and capitalization: pS-Eau, GRET, WaterAid, International Water and Sanitation Centre (IRC), Water and Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP), etc.;
- research institutes and think tanks: the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI), the Swiss Federal Institute of Aquatic Science and Technology (EAWAG), the International Institute for

2. See references.

3. <https://www.susana.org/en/>

Environment & Development (IIED), the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), etc.;

- finally, among the more recent actors to mobilize on the issue, and with a strong impact either in terms of finance or expertise: the International Water Association (IWA), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Toilet Board Coalition (TBC) created in 2014, etc.

All these actors are starting to develop a specific area of reflection on the link between sanitation and urban management, notably summarized in the Citywide Inclusive Sanitation initiative of the World Bank and its partners.⁴ This initiative capitalizes on the advances made in recent decades; it aims to demystify sanitation, debunking myths, and above all defines four widely shared basic principles:

- prioritize the human right to sanitation for all;
- deliver safe management along the whole sanitation service chain;
- recognize that sanitation contributes to a thriving urban economy;
- commit to working in partnership to deliver city-wide inclusive sanitation.

At the same time, decision-making, urban planning and sanitation management tools have proliferated: guidelines for developing municipal strategies, rapid diagnosis methods, social engineering and participation methodologies, implementation guidelines or manuals, etc. All of this work is primarily aimed at those working in the field to contribute to the strengthening of human and technical capacity and to promote technical choices and methods of social participation adapted to local urban and institutional contexts. These works promote the idea that the challenges are not so much related to technical feasibility or lack of funding, but more to the governance of urban sanitation: regulatory frameworks, organizational patterns, management modalities, partnerships, skills, etc.

The use of these tools by practitioners, however, requires a certain amount of time, which is unavoidable. In addition, their appropriation by policymakers still requires a transformation of recommendations into political messages. In other words, the matching of technical requirements with local political agendas remains a field to explore further, to ensure the full support of the actors involved, both locally and internationally.

POLITICAL ECONOMY, INCENTIVES AND INSTITUTIONS

It is in this spirit that more recent works have been opening up the black box of the political economy of urban sanitation, questioning the assumptions and discourses.⁵ New areas of reflection, capitalization and evaluation further enrich the specific urban sanitation expertise.

Firstly, it appears that in cases where public authorities have mobilized for urban sanitation, the decision has largely been influenced either by an emergency situation (an epidemic for example) or by the personal motivation of “champions”. These conditions are necessary upstream of the choice of sanitation planning and management methods. Unfortunately, there is a concern that in many developing cities, a reluctance persists to use decentralized sanitation techniques, alternatives that symbolically do not measure up to the “modernist” model of the single, centralized sewer system, even though such a system is difficult to finance and maintain. Moreover, the limited perception of the collective threat by social and political elites, who are drivers of change, tends to limit mobilization for services that they do not realize are lacking, or for which they do not see the negative externalities for the whole city – unlike the hygienist movements in European cities in the nineteenth century.

As a consequence, it is necessary to identify a set of new incentives: the economic arguments of the return on investment (around 5.5 according to some studies) for example, although highly significant has been insufficient to mobilize public authorities. Yet, to encourage actors to act, it is important to understand upstream their interests and positions. This work of mapping the actors – public, private and informal operators, user communities, NGOs, donors, elected officials – and their interactions has not yet been systematized. Understanding and above all analysing and comparing the rationale behind their actions, the obstacles to their commitments for large-scale actions remains a knowledge gap that is yet to be explored.

Moreover, the analysis of the interactions between the actors, their meeting points or, on the contrary, the bottlenecks within the sanitation sector or with third sectors such as urban planning or public health should still be clarified. The opportunities for collaboration that can be observed — or, similarly, the obstacles to such collaboration—presuppose an “enabling politico-institutional environment”. Research work is now addressing the components and conditions of such an environment. However, the governance, institutions,

4. <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/589771503512867370/Citywide-Inclusive-Sanitation.pdf>

5. See references.

instruments and mechanisms of a sector are very specific to it, especially regarding urban sanitation.

Considering that on a technical and commercial level, the sanitation service in developing cities is and will be provided by a variety of suppliers, the same applies for its governance: the model of a single centralized operator proves to be largely unsuitable. Therefore, if the public authorities want to steer, regulate, balance financially and socially the supply of services, they must position themselves as coordinators of the variety of providers involved. And for this, they must be able to identify the interests and interactions at stake to be able to coordinate the rationales for the benefit of the common good. This call for the positioning of public authorities is necessary, but the methods and instruments that can be used are still unstable.

Thus, empirical evidence and systematic analysis of the interests and institutions at work in urban sanitation can still be substantiated. This would feed the reflection and inform the decisions of the actors engaged in the sector, while also facilitating the harmonization of the technical and political discourses to allow public authorities to take ownership. The production of recommendations in

this field is only just beginning, but will undoubtedly offer promising avenues of action to achieve the goal of improved sanitation for all, and more broadly to contribute to policies for sustainable urban development, which are both inclusive and sustainable. ■

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