

UP EXPERT OPINION

Access to safe toilets and sanitation is an essential human right, says UP expert for World Toilet Day

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Every person has the basic right to water and sanitation; however, millions of people around the world have this right infringed upon daily. More than 3.6 billion people globally do not have access to safely managed sanitation services and, for this reason, World Toilet Day was founded in 2001 by philanthropist Jack Sim, and is celebrated annually on 19 November. This day serves as a platform to increase general knowledge on what sanitation is; raise awareness on poor sanitation and lack of toilets globally; as well as to allow people who have good sanitation to recognise the importance thereof.

Securing access to basic sanitation has been acknowledged by many policies, declarations, and agendas, including the United Nations' Sustainable Development Agenda 2030 which aims to ensure the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all with Sustainable Development Goal 6. The health implications of not having proper sanitation services are detrimental. Poor sanitation has been the main cause of roughly 432 000 deaths each year, especially in low- and middle-income countries. According to the UN, more than 700 children under the age of five die daily due to diarrhoeal diseases (such as cholera) as a result of poor sanitation, poor hygiene or unsafe drinking water.

In the South African context, having access to water and sanitation is stipulated as an essential human right as set out in the Constitution. From the current South African population of 60.4 million people, the total number of people without adequate sanitation is estimated at between 21.8 million and 25.5 million. The millions mentioned above who do not have access to safe sanitation use either the inadequate bucket system, unimproved pit latrines or the veld.

Access to safe sanitation means having a healthy and safe way of disposing of human waste among setting other hygienic environmental conditions by disposing of general waste and making water drinkable. There is a general misconception about what sanitation is and so it is important to acknowledge that a toilet does not automatically equal safe sanitation. In many local communities, people do have access to one shared toilet which remains as unjust as not having access to it at all. Other communities have physical toilets but have a poor drainage system in which the waste still filters into the communities' water sources. Some communities in South Africa continue to use portable toilets and pit latrines and, sadly, we still often read in the news about children falling into pit toilets and dying a very undignified death.

Increased risk of malnutrition and other digestive diseases

The most well-known consequence of not having safe sanitation is the illnesses that are caused due to open exposure to faeces and contaminated water sources. Some of these illnesses range from mild to severe, including cholera, dysentery, typhoid, intestinal worm infections and polio. As the lack of sanitation is experienced in mostly poor communities, they often do not have accessibility to established healthcare services either which can often lead to prolonged illnesses. Research has shown that the lack of sanitation also increases the risks of malnutrition and other digestive diseases.

Beyond the health implications of poor sanitation, the impact of poor sanitation in communities contributes to many social ills. Women and girls with no access to toilets must often wait until it is dark outside to not draw attention, which places them in a more vulnerable position to being abused and sexually assaulted. This does not only affect their safety, but the dignity of people is affected when they are required to live in unhealthy unsafe conditions. All of this is because people do not have access to basic sanitation services within their communities.

There is much to be done in order to achieve safe sanitation, and it might be asked if it has anything to do with social work or social welfare in general. We might not have everything but we do have social policy which is concerned with how societies across the world meet human needs, including security, education, work, health and well-being. As a social worker, I feel strongly that we have a role to empower individuals and communities, especially the most vulnerable, to know their rights and to continue to push for the realisation thereof. The basic right to safe sanitation is included in several social policies in South Africa and that has everything to do with humanity and social work in general.

We still have a long way to go, as sanitation is just one of the many achievements that globally need to be achieved along with addressing many other injustices. World Toilet Day is an important awareness campaign to spread the word about the lack of access to sanitation across the globe, as well as locally, and continue to ensure that no human is left behind when it comes to access to safe toilets and sanitation.

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa, with its administration offices located on the Hatfield Campus, Pretoria. This 115-year-old institution is also the largest producer of research in South Africa.

Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). It is the only University in the country with a Faculty of Veterinary Science, ranked top in Africa. Overall has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 55 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes.

UP is one of the top five universities in South Africa, according to the 2019-2020 rankings by the Centre for World University Rankings. It is ranked among the top 100 universities worldwide in three fields of study (veterinary science, theology, and law) and the top 1% in eight fields of study (agricultural sciences, clinical

medicine, engineering, environment/ecology, immunology, microbiology, plant and animal sciences and social sciences).

In May 2020, the annual UK Financial Times Executive Education Rankings again ranked GIBS as the top South African and African business school. The University also has an extensive community engagement programme with approximately 33 000 students involved in community upliftment. Furthermore, UP is building considerable capacities and strengths for the Fourth Industrial Revolution by preparing students for the world beyond University and offering work-readiness and entrepreneurship training.

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