

Eradicating pit latrines in schools should be more than an SDG in 2024

By [Marian Wagner](#)

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Each year, World Toilet Day (19 November) commands global attention as an annual event that serves as a stark reminder of the ongoing global sanitation crisis. This day emphasises the importance of flushing toilets, a basic amenity that remains inaccessible to many. As per the World Health Organisation, an alarming 2.2 billion people are still living without safe drinking water, and a staggering 3.5 billion people lack access to safely managed sanitation.



Marion Wagner addressing the crowd at Breadline's 30th anniversary.

In 2022 alone, WTD generated 1.45 billion digital views across 147 countries. The theme, "Accelerating Change", was a clarion call to intensify our efforts to address this humanitarian crisis. This urgency stems from the fact that we are lagging in achieving [Sustainable Development Goal \(SDG\) 6: water and sanitation for all by 2030](#).

It's evident that we have a monumental task ahead of us to ensure that nearly half of the world's population has access to a basic human necessity: flushing toilets.



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Closer to home, in rural South Africa, thousands grapple with another daunting and degrading challenge: pit latrines. This crisis currently affects more than 500,000 school children.

Pit latrines have claimed many lives, especially those of children over many decades, making it a national crisis. Together with corporate South Africa and sponsors, Breadline has set a goal to raise R156m towards the cause over the next two years to impact 120,000 children across 240 schools, and address 26% of the more than 900 schools that still have pit toilets in South Africa.

“ This battle is a long and hard one that cannot be addressed without the help of local government, businesses, and individuals. ”

While there are billions of people who have never even seen a flushing toilet, the stark contrast is that for those who are considered more fortunate, access to flushing toilets is something many might take for granted. However, it is worth noting that beyond the concept of simply granting billions of people across the globe access to safe sanitation, being able to readily use a flushing toilet is a matter of dignity.

It is a matter of safety, health, and well-being. Using bathroom facilities should not be a source of embarrassment, anxiety, fear, or shame, but should provide everyone with the confidence that they have privacy, and that they will not be harmed in any way.

Access to clean toilets can alter society

Beyond fearing for one's life, the consequences of not having access to safe and clean toilets are far-reaching, and it has an impact on the health of children and communities as unhygienic conditions increase the spread of diseases, posing a particular threat to children's health. It also exacerbates gender inequality as many young girls miss school when they're menstruating due to the shame and stigma associated with it, and overall, poor sanitation leads to absenteeism and reduced concentration, impacting academic performance.

Lastly, from a social and economic point of view, there is an increase in healthcare expenses, loss in productivity and educational setbacks when there is a lack of proper access to safe and clean toilets.

On the other hand, when one considers the positive impact one, 10 or 100 flushing toilets have within a single community the importance becomes clear. Outside of World Toilet Day, Breadline installed 66 eco-friendly, low-flush toilet systems, 18 urinals and handwashing facilities at five primary schools in KwaZulu-Natal since June last year, and the impact that the new facilities have made has been nothing short of life-changing.

Many of the educators and parents impacted believe that flushing toilets are a symbol of hope for the future.

When looking ahead, it is clear that we all need to do more and strive harder, day in and day out, if we want to solve the world's toilet crisis. Beyond the SDGs, a flushing toilet has the potential to not only change, but also save, a precious life.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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