

Reviews and resources

Determinants of Customer Decisions to Pay Utility Water Bills Promptly

Josses Mugabi

VDM Verlag, 276 pages, €79.00

This book researches the topic of cost-recovery and payment of water bills in a low-income country (Uganda). The use of a socio-cognitive perspective to understand the behaviour of consumers in the payment of their water bills forms the main contribution of the book. In doing so, the book complements the economic perspective on cost-recovery that has dominated the water services sector in the past decades. The author's main argument is that customers' intentions to pay water bills are motivated by three main factors. Firstly, consumers are motivated by their perceptions of the benefits of paying their bills. These perceived benefits include avoiding disconnection of the service, better service levels and avoiding the accumulation of bills. Secondly, the social pressure of neighbours, family members and the utility on customers to pay their bills influences their decision to do so. Thirdly, the 'control' that a customer has over payment of the water bill influences

the promptness with which the water bill is paid. Aspects which influence the level of 'control' that a customer has include the amount of the water bill, mistakes in meter reading, frequency of service interruptions, increase in water consumption and financial difficulties. The author's argument is based on thorough research in eight small towns in Uganda. The decision to focus on small towns is laudable as too much attention in the water services sector focuses on either large urban centres or rural areas, which overlooks the fact that achieving the Millennium Development Goals on water and sanitation in small towns remains a major challenge.

The book is written as an academic study with a strong emphasis on research design, methodology and data analysis. Although some questions can be raised regarding generalization of the research findings to other socio-cultural contexts, the study represents a solid and thorough investigation of the determinants of the decision to pay water bills. Having said this, the academic style of writing and structure as well as the emphasis on research design and justification, methodology and details of statistical analyses

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do not make the book easily readable for a wider audience. Although the book may not be very appealing for practitioners outside the academic realm, the practical implications concerning consumers' behaviour in paying water bills are most relevant. In particular, the lessons emanating from the study are relevant for utility managers in their pursuit of improving their billing-collection ratio and, as such, their level of cost recovery.

In the final chapter, the author translates the study's findings into policy implications for utility managers. Although the idea of focusing on a socio-cognitive perspective is indeed new and interesting for the water service sector, the resulting policy implications for utility managers seem to be quite standard and hardly seem innovative. Policy prescriptions such as ensuring reliable water supply, improving billing accuracy, allowing flexible payment arrangements, and the importance of disconnecting defaulters are quite well known within the sector in order to improve payment of water bills.

In this sense the study, though undoubtedly an interesting contribution to the field of water services management in general and the topic of cost-recovery in particular, presents a somewhat disappointing conclusion to an otherwise interesting (although highly academic)

book. In conclusion, although the findings are relevant and important, the book will only be of interest to a relatively small audience (notably academics interested in cost recovery for water services). The findings could have a lot more impact if written in a different and abbreviated format for utility managers and policy makers.

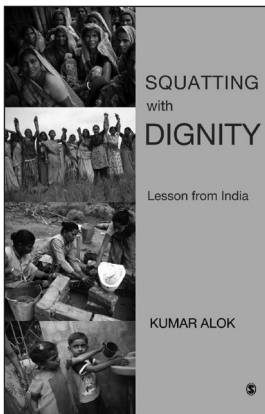
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Squatting with Dignity: Lessons from India

Kumar Alok

2010, SAGE Publications India
Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, £45.00

Improvements in rural sanitation are critical for meaningful achievement for many of the Millennium Development Goals. With over 600 million people reported to defecate daily in the open, South Asia has the distinction of the poorest record in sanitation in the world. But recent developments in the region, especially in India, require recognition. In the last few years, toilet coverage in rural India has increased from 22 per cent of households in 2001 to 54 per cent in 2008 according to official government statistics. Kumar Alok has the right credentials to write about this remarkable achievement. As Director of Rural Sanitation in the Department of Drinking Water Supply in the Ministry of Rural Development for five



years and thereafter three years as sanitation specialist in the UNICEF office in Delhi, he has not only enjoyed a ringside seat for these proceedings but has often been a key player in their instigation.

The book documents the recent history of promoting rural sanitation in India and the tremendous success exhibited by the efforts of the government with the support of a multitude of NGOs. The introduction is straightforward and unexceptional. But the next chapter begins as a treacherous diversion into the 'Wonder that was India' from a sanitation view point. This is a spiritual odyssey on the importance of sanitation in ancient Hindu literature, its decay and reassertion in the thoughts and works of Vivekananda, Gandhi and a certain Sriram Sharma Acharya. Fortunately, the latter part of the chapter is a much more relevant discussion of changes in contemporary policy prior to the Total Sanitation Campaign in 1999 and its key component the Nirmal Gram Puruskar (Clean Village Award) in 2003.

The chapters which describe the evolution of the Total Sanitation Campaign as a national programme and its implementation are certainly the most interesting sections of the book. They enable insights into the events, organizations and most importantly the individuals who played a role

in the making of policy on rural sanitation at the national level.

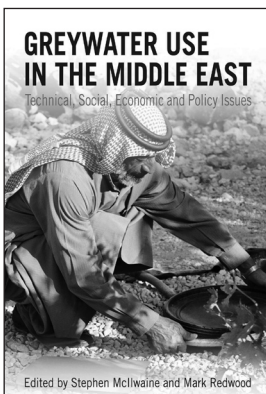
However, a disturbing perspective runs through the book: the overall achievements are wonderful according to the author, the policy is perfect and it is only differences in interest and efforts during implementation that explains the differences in the achievement levels in different states. But is the overall achievement that impressive? Less than 7 per cent of India's rural local governments have won the award for becoming open defecation-free (ODF). Even more disturbing details emerge from the evaluation study given in the book: less than 2.5 per cent of these award winners have sustained their achievement! A preponderance of the 32 per cent additional toilets constructed after 2001 may not even be in use!

If this is the case, then all that has happened has been a repeat of the subsidy-driven toilet construction of earlier decades, but on a much larger scale. Still, there has been a difference in the quality of achievement in different states in India. Exploring this could have yielded valuable insights on strategies for sustainable results.

But Alok does not venture to do this because for him, despite all protestations to the contrary, sanitation is only about toilet construction and not sustainable behaviour change.

It is a subject that deserved to be written about, but unfortunately this book is only a paean to its success. The details of what are the good and the bad in the sanitation story of India we do not get to see. The overlay of praise, of a personal philosophy and world view that sees so much 'Wonder that was India', are unfortunately too overwhelming to distinguish the limited critical comment. Sanitation performance must finally be judged by the ability to ensure safe containment and disposal of excreta – not by counting toilets. In the end, if the language had been less flowery and the syntax more comfortable, reading would be less of an ordeal even for those few with an interest in sanitation who may choose to pick up this book.

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Greywater Use in the Middle East: Technical, Social, Economic and Policy Issues
 edited by Stephen McIlwaine and Mark Redwood
 2010, Practical Action Publishing, 198 pages, £14.95

Treatment and reuse of greywater in countries of the Middle East is set in a context of conflict between water scarcity, tense regional political relations and stringent cultural perceptions and norms. An expert meeting held

in Aqaba, Jordan, in 2007, brought together different sector specialists – consultants, researchers and practitioners from eight countries – to exchange and debate on a set of key issues, challenges and achievements in greywater use in the Middle East. Selected projects on greywater use in home agriculture between 1999 and 2007 were analysed and the essence of the meeting was captured in this book. Thanks to the case studies in the book, real world practices and experiences of different technologies and their performance characteristics are highlighted rather than mere theoretical aspects. However, this anthology distinguishes itself from other publications in this field, as it retains specific focus on the socio-economic issues.

The editors, Stephen McIlwaine and Mark Redwood, have concerted their efforts in compiling a well-balanced selection of articles, divided into three sections 'Technical aspects', 'Socioeconomic aspects' and 'Policy issues'. These are preceded by a comprehensive thematic introduction and completed by a telling conclusion. Contrary to conventional expectations, the section on 'Technical aspects' does not limit itself to clinical facts and figures of nutrient removal or BOD loads, but rather contributes through case study description to a more balanced understanding of the

topic, since it includes social, economic and environmental information on the study sites. The section unfortunately covers only three case studies from two countries (Jordan and Palestine). The addition of further experiences from the region would have been useful to gain a better overall regional view of greywater management. A clearly arranged selection matrix for different greywater treatment systems is a very helpful structural element in this section. It is regrettable, however, that no mention is made or analysis conducted of soil and crop impact. The long-term effects of greywater irrigation on soil fertility, crop yield and possible alteration in cultivated plants would have contributed to enriching this section.

The section on 'Socioeconomic aspects' provides a holistic view of the social and economic feasibility of existing greywater systems. Valuable insights into participatory planning approaches and stakeholder acceptance deserve careful reading. A further article in this section, viewing a greywater management project

through a gender lens, provides an exciting and important aspect.

The section ends with a topic rarely discussed in comparable literature: greywater use from an Islamic perspective by Odeh Rashed Al-Jayyousi. The author leads the reader through relevant and conclusive excerpts of Islamic principles endorsing greywater use by justifying and explaining its value as part of an integrated water resource management approach. A very refreshing and illuminating chapter indeed.

The section on 'Policy issues', which compares policy and regulatory approaches in different countries/states, is somewhat hard to read and digest, yet, it points to the difficulties of defining best practices and reasonable rules and standards. Overall, this book is exhaustively informative, as it covers a broader area of expertise than one would expect from its title. I warmly recommend this compilation to environmental planners and implementing agencies.

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