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## Goal 6

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## Humming a New Tune on World Toilet Day

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By Professor Lyla Mehta and Dr Alan Nicol\*

BRIGHTON/LONDON, UK | 18 November 2023 (IDN) — A hummingbird is the symbol of **2023's World Toilet Day**. (19 November). Fabled as a small actor in a huge drama—putting out a fire with tiny droplets of water—the analogy appears to be that every one of us doing our bit can make positive change happen in the sanitation world.

It's a noble sentiment and part of the solution, undoubtedly, not least because 3.6 billion, about 46% of the world's population, live without access to safe sanitation facilities. And sanitation remains one of the most off-track Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Yet the analogy has an in-built assumption that progress has been slower than desired—perhaps impeded even—because far more individuals need to be 'doing their bit' than is currently the case. If that comes to pass, then change will happen, and sanitation provision will advance globally and locally.

But there remain fundamental questions unanswered. What if the barriers to real change don't come from sum totals of individual action but instead from structural and systemic impediments hindering those seeking change?

What if the problem is that billions of people produce shit every day, and this is then seen simply as a waste management problem—politically unappealing to resolve and therefore pushed down the rankings of government action as well as socially stigmatised?

### Growing small towns

What if, in other words, the problem isn't the number of hummingbirds, but the cage(s) in which they're trapped?

This is particularly important in growing small towns that are home to half the world's urban population and where it is difficult to replicate and extend networked capital-intensive centralised sanitation and wastewater management systems.

Enabling social and political systems to suddenly unlock the pathways to progress is not an easy lock to pick. For one thing, poverty and exclusion combined with topographical, technical, and institutional challenges make safely managed sanitation in rapidly growing urban areas of the Global South an urgent global challenge.

These spaces are characterised by both social and geographical marginalisation and are inhabited by poor and historically disadvantaged groups such as migrants and the homeless, as well as socially excluded groups including minorities, lower castes, and Indigenous community members, to name a few.

National and global sanitation campaigns have increased toilet coverage, yet the invisible infrastructures and institutional structures required to deliver safe sanitation for all receive much less attention, and sanitation workers still suffer severe discrimination.

## **Brown Gold**

For example, in Gulariya in western Nepal, which declared itself open defecation-free (ODF) in 2015, 80% of the sanitation system is emptied by hand, and waste is contaminating groundwater because of uncovered drains and poorly lined pit latrines; and there are additional problems with the existing faecal sludge treatment plant. This situation can lead to serious public health consequences.

Recent work under the Institute of Development Studies-led **Towards Brown Gold project** in Nepal, India, Ethiopia and Ghana with partners including the International Water Management Institute has helped to show how the cage can be unlocked and 'hummingbirds enabled', by working with local partners and communities while examining how local communities experience and live with urban sanitation challenges.

These includes understanding the kinds of social and technical processes needed to re-frame 'shit'—a harmful, polluting waste product—into 'brown gold', underscoring how waste can provide an opportunity for communities through re-use.

'Brown Gold' is the safe (re)use of shit and wastewater to unlock its potential and new value as a resource. And not just in terms of financial value, but also in terms of improvements in health and livelihoods and social value for sanitation service providers who often work at great risk to themselves.

For example, in Wa, northern Ghana, private companies collect faecal sludge from storage containers that are disposed of in landfills. Farmers often purchase this waste directly to use as fertilizer—even though illegal—because of fast-rising artificial fertilizer costs.

## ***Our research is showing how we can recover and reuse faecal sludge safely and more equitably, thus supporting safety and sustainability along waste-to-food system value chains.***

In Nanded, Maharashtra, and Allepey, Kerala, India, we are researching the interaction of actors in the sanitation system, focusing on the history of sanitation work, flows of wastewater and fecal sludge, issues of illegality, informality, and social exclusion as well as the potential of decentralized systems that can address waste problems in marginalized and disenfranchised localities.

In Tigray, northern Ethiopia, **the devastating civil war led to an urban agriculture boom** in Mekelle city as a way to address growing food insecurity. Our research has focussed on understanding dynamic interactions of water, land, waste, infrastructure and humans as well as the policies and regulatory frameworks that can enable the circular economy to provide a survival mechanism amidst poly-crises, including climate, conflict and Covid-19.

Interdisciplinary in nature, the Towards Brown Gold project draws on social and natural sciences to understand the multifaceted dimensions of safely managed sanitation. Art interventions in the form of dance workshops, 'humanure'

planting, song competitions, and a [sanitation education and lobbying facility at Lumbini Peace Park Nepal](#) also help in the push for rights to clean water and sanitation as well as the rights of sanitation workers , and inspire people to reimagine alternative sanitation futures.

Unlocking brown gold therefore begs a whole host of socio-technical, economic and policy concerns—the structural cage, as it were, in which individuals act: Who wins in this cage, or perhaps loses as new values are generated?

And following the avian analogy, which hawks out there are ready to swoop and control the direction that new values take? The political economy of turning shit and systems of shit management into valuable resources is in itself a complicated—and political—puzzle.

So, as the hummingbirds gather in numbers, and the hawks circle above, perhaps the trick is to ensure that managing the nectar of ‘Brown Gold’ is entrusted to all our collective hands, and not just a few hungry beaks.

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