



SORIT / CSE

TYING UP WITH SANITATION ECOSYSTEMS

It is imperative to reimagine the role of the corporate beyond funding and infrastructure creation to achieve a sustainable sanitation ecosystem

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TODAY, THERE is an unprecedented buzz and energy around which corporates have been called to action in the sanitation sector. The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) has provided India Inc with an opportunity to spend on a specific cause with high visibility. It therefore comes as no surprise that today many corporates are responding enthusiastically to this call to action, with a majority leveraging Section 135 of the Companies Act, 2013. However, corporates should not be mere funders, for we as a country, would lose out on an opportunity to leverage the value additions that this sector can offer, particularly in the realms of innovation in technology, project management and scalability.

It has become critical to reflect on the current trends around corporate engagement in the sector, the gaps in the sanitation ecosystem and the potential role that corporates can play. Ultimately, it is essential that we view the corporate not merely as a source of funding or for infrastructure creation, but as a partner in India's journey towards sustainable sanitation.

Open challenge

Sanitation is one of India's greatest unmet challenges. Inadequate sanitation has dire consequences for public health, children's education and growth, women's safety and the fight against poverty.

According to a report of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), over 50 per cent of India's population still defecates in the open. Further, many households remain unconnected to the sewage system, with over 0.13 million tonnes of human waste being generated every day, and this number is only going to increase.

Given that sanitation in the Indian context is multifaceted, layered in behavioural, social and cultural complexities, there is a wide disparity. While 85.9 per cent people in Odisha and 82.4 per cent in Bihar do not have access to toilets, a state like Sikkim was recently declared 100 per cent open defecation-free (ODF). With the mammoth task at hand, the government's target to make India ODF by 2019 necessitates the involvement and collaboration amongst multiple stakeholders, including the corporate sector.

In letter and spirit, it is important to acknowledge that the call to action to corporates, particularly from the government, envisages support beyond just the funding or construction of toilets. The recent guidelines of the Ministry of Drinking Water and Sanitation (MDWS) say: "The creativity and efficiency of the corporate sector, and their management and financial resources can help in achieving the vision of a Swachh Bharat." Thus, the modalities of this support may be in the form of financial assistance, by way of the Swachh Bharat Kosh, or getting involved through technical expertise, marketing excellence and outreach support.

The government would like corporates to engage through a constructive value-driven approach. Further, by using the mandate of the Companies Act, 2013, the government is looking for ways to bring about a more effective and efficient approach to achieve the goals of sanitation through convergence with corporate social responsibility (CSR).

With the aim to capture CSR trends in the sector, the India Sanitation Coalition (ISC) recently released a report, *CSR in WASH: What are India's top companies up to?*, anchored by Samhita Social Services, a partner of the coalition, analysing the top 100 companies with the largest CSR budgets. The report found that 90 per cent of the companies have at least one CSR programme in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH). However, the findings demonstrated that 75 per cent of the companies were supporting programmes related to infrastructure creation—construction of toilets and water facilities, with limited attention on behaviour change programmes. It was only a handful of companies that were engaging across the value chain of sanitation that includes all the components of Build, Use, Maintain and Treat (BUMT).

Some companies are also implementing operations and maintenance programmes. Additionally, it was also found that industries with a strategic interest—like Heavy Engineering & Manufacturing and fast moving consumer goods companies (FMCG)—were more

likely to support WASH programmes than other industries and that most of these WASH programmes were concentrated in rural areas. Also, while the call to action envisaged a role for corporates beyond funding and infrastructure creation, the data showed that a majority were inclined to stay only with funding, rather than drive the sanitation programme.

Beyond compliance

To reimagine the corporate as a partner, it is important to first understand why many have fallen into this compliance, number-driven approach. The primary reason is that they have not been integrated into the broader sanitation ecosystem. Thus, many corporate-funded projects without the right partners and guidance run the risk of solely focusing on supply side targets.

Initially, the approach of the government led many corporates to view the SBM goals as a "toilet-building" programme. However, this number-driven and disconnected approach can be disruptive to the broader objective to end open defecation. Therefore, the lack of a supportive ecosystem remains a hindrance for corporates to move towards the role of a partner, even though some may be willing and able to do so.

Many development partners also conventionally follow certain partnership stereotypes seeing corporates as mere funding pipes for projects. To move forward, corporates must be integrated into the sanitation ecosystem to enable partnerships, knowledge sharing, capacity building initiatives and a platform for communication and exchange. This includes incorporating small and medium enterprises into the mix, and in turn, encouraging private-public partnership models that encourage innovation of affordable, yet aspirational products.

Entrepreneurship across the sanitation value chain will play a critical role in creating the service infrastructure for safe sanitation.

The opportunities for corporate engagement in the sector are vast. The required capital expenditure for the SBM programme alone is estimated to be ₹255,240 crore for rural and ₹131,137 crore for urban. However, we must now create a supportive and enabling ecosystem that can help sensitise corporates towards sanitation, facilitate impactful partnerships, and leverage their strengths. Even though sanitation may not be a corporate's business focus, providing support both through CSR funds and volunteering would go a long way in bringing about ODF.

Similarly, corporates already engaged in related sectors like education and health can also seamlessly move into the sanitation space with the right support. To achieve sustainable sanitation, it is imperative that we re-imagine the role of the corporate beyond funding and infrastructure creation, to that of a partner. Together, through collective efforts, we can achieve a clean India. ■

(The author is chair of the India Sanitation Coalition)

Entrepreneurship across the sanitation value chain will play a critical role in converting those who defecate in the open to practice safe sanitation. Similarly, corporates already engaged in related sectors like education and health can also seamlessly move into the sanitation space with the right support