



Harnessing the wisdom of crowds: Open discussion forum helps to answer sanitation related questions

We know it all too well from our daily work: E-mails have nowadays become key to our highly interactive and inter-linked working environment. But despite being a useful communication tool, it provides only a one-to-one or small group communication and does not allow information to be shared with a wider group and “outsiders”.

Therefore valuable information such as reports, discussions, photos, technical drawings, posters and new ideas are locked up in private mailboxes and are not accessible to others. They cannot be found with search engines like Google. Also the sheer number of e-mails can be a burden and hindrance to actually discussing issues and to passing on information when people are looking for it.

This is also true for the sanitation sector. Practitioners, planners or policy makers do not hear enough about good practices and lessons learnt from their own country, neighbouring countries or even worldwide. It is therefore no surprise that many practitioners do not have the appropriate solutions and concepts at hand and try to reinvent the wheel again and again. So how can we improve knowledge sharing and collaborative learning and at the same time reduce repetition of mistakes in sanitation system design?

Discussion forums

One promising avenue is the use of discussion forums. The idea for an open discussion forum on sanitation came from our experience that when you want to buy a new car or have a question about your baby’s teeth: where do you get advice from? You put your question into a search engine like Google and you end up reading other people’s

postings on a discussion forum. Usually, those questions and answers prove to be very helpful.

The same mechanism can hold true for a discussion forum on sanitation issues. This is why the secretariat of the Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA) set up a new discussion forum and launched it in July 2011: www.forum.susana.org.

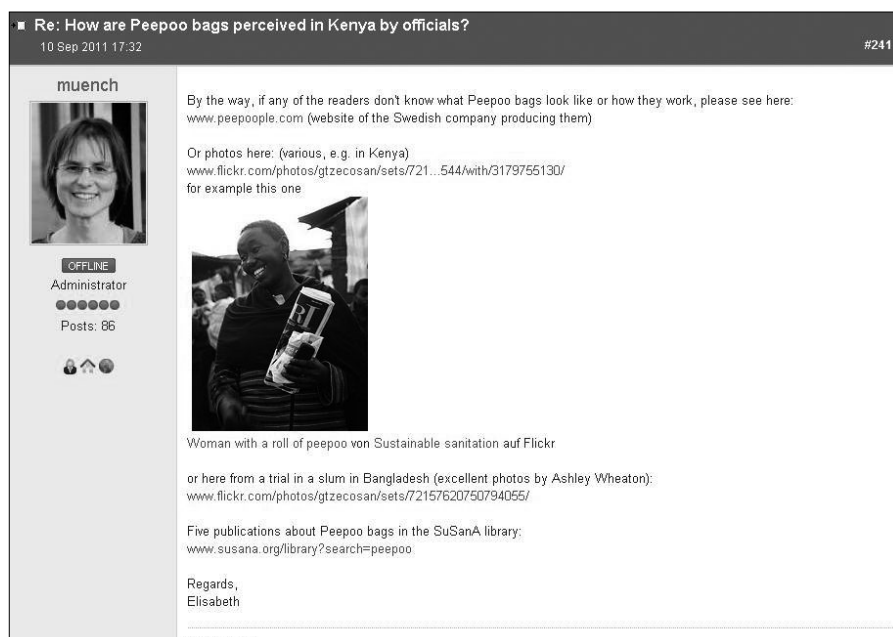
The forum is open as opposed to some existing closed forums which require a login even just for reading or are only e-mail based.

“An open forum is a clever and modern way to engage people in knowledge exchange and at the same time make the information easily accessible through search engines such as Google or Yahoo,” explains Dr. Elisabeth von Muench from the Sustainable Sanitation Program at GIZ, where the SuSanA secretariat is located. “In this way not only the usual

“sanitation crowd” but also outsiders can read and most importantly give their valuable input.”

This secretariat work is carried out by GIZ on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

The Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA) is an informal network of organisations and individuals who share a common vision on sustainable sanitation. SuSanA came into existence in early 2007 and works as a coordination platform, working platform, sounding board, contributor to the policy dialogue on sustainable sanitation and as a “catalyst”. The current number of partner organisations in the SuSanA network is 172 ranging from local NGOs, international NGOs, governmental or state-owned organisations, multilaterals, private sector, networks and associations to education and research institutions. A detailed partner



Screenshot of one posting on the forum (about Peepoo bags in Kenya).

mapping is available here: <http://www.susana.org/lang-en/partners/susana-partner-mapping>.

Participation in SuSanA is open and free of charge to those who want to join and be active in the promotion of sustainable sanitation systems. The SuSanA invites international, regional and local organisations as well as individuals to join the network, contribute ideas, and to become active in the 11 thematic working groups.

Today, the SuSanA discussion forum already has 970 registered users and 110 topics, some of which have attracted over 1000 views and more than 30 replies. A broad range of categories are covered such as sanitation systems and technologies, health and hygiene, community-led total sanitation, school sanitation, sanitation systems for special conditions, menstrual hygiene management, SuSanA working groups and many more.

For example, one of the most popular discussion topics in recent weeks was the new mobile toilet concept for slums in Bangladesh, especially useful for females and people with disabilities who cannot easily access public toilets.

“In the last few months, I had been answering many questions about the design and the concept again and again via individual e-mails, says Mona



A typical make-shift toilet with new mobile MoSan toilet inside it (artist impression).

Credit Mona Mijthab



A family in the slums inspects the new toilet that can fit in a small room and looks pretty (artist impression).

Credit Mona Mijthab

Mijthab, an industrial designer who worked with GIZ Bangladesh on a mobile sanitation solution in urban slums. “Now I have the option of posting this information once on a sanitation discussion forum which saves me time. If someone asks me for information I can simply send the discussion link or tell them to post their questions on the forum for me to answer there. This reduces my work load and even promotes my work to more people, as the information can be found by anyone searching the internet for this topic”.

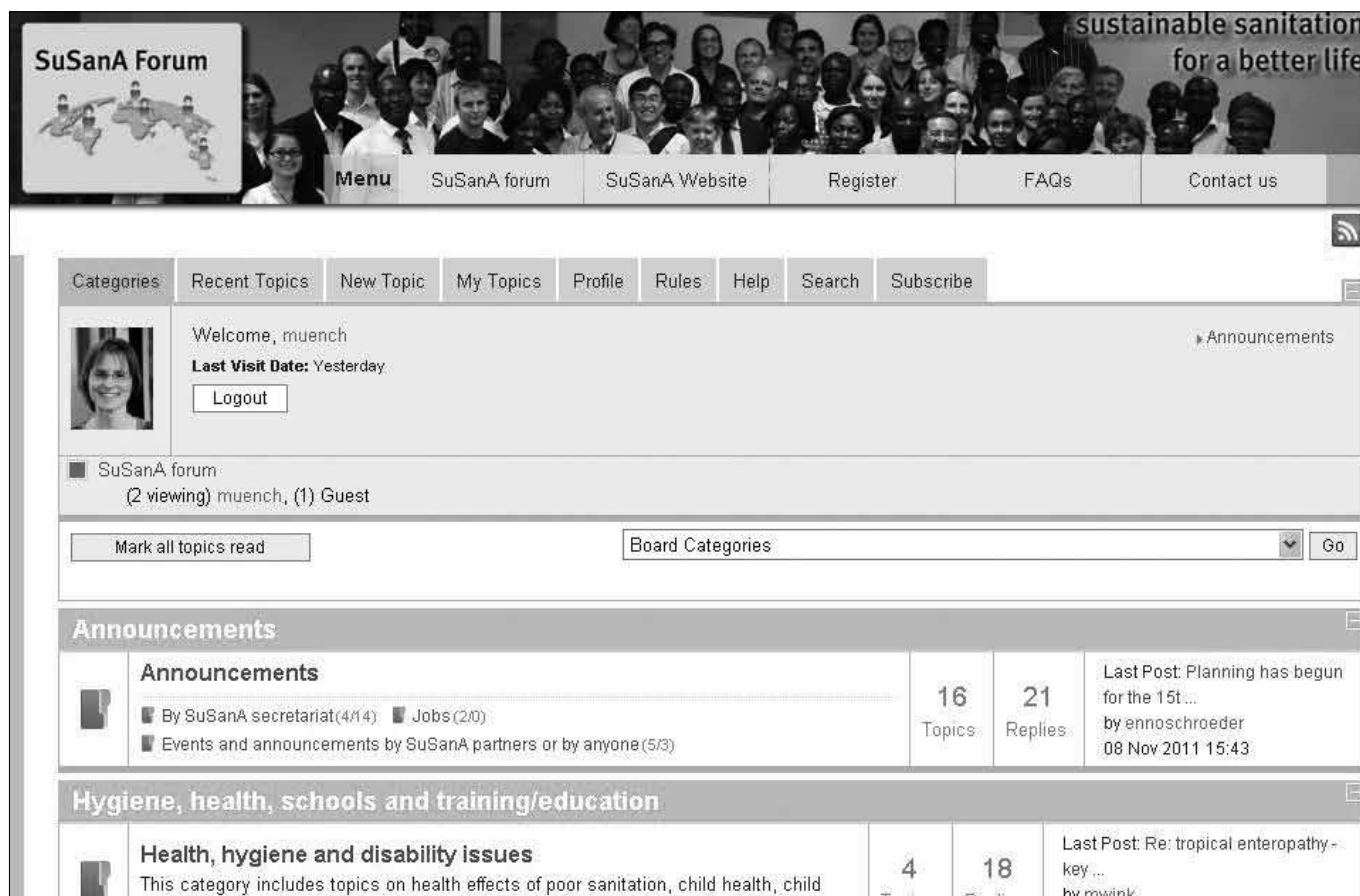
At the same time many leads of the 11 SuSanA working groups started to use the forum to discuss relevant issues there instead of group emails only. Working group members as well as outsiders can now easily join in the discussion whenever it fits them best

and without endless rounds of emails. The other communication channels of SuSanA, such as the facebook page and the website with case studies, working group sections and the library containing nearly 1000 documents on sustainable sanitation topics are further options to interact, share knowledge and become visible.

SuSanA working groups

SuSanA has eleven thematic working groups which cover a variety of different sanitation aspects such as factsheets, presentations and publications on these topics, which can be downloaded:

- Capacity development
- Finance and economics
- Renewable energies, climate change
- Sanitation systems, technology, hygiene and health



Screenshot of starting page of discussion forum.

- Food security and productive sanitation systems
- Sustainable sanitation for cities and planning
- Community, rural and schools (with gender and social aspects)
- Emergency and reconstruction situations
- Sanitation as a business and public awareness
- Operation and maintenance
- Groundwater protection

All registered users of the forum can contribute by creating new discussion topics or by responding to the posts of others. The option to create a user profile, including a photo and contact information makes the forum to some extent personal. However users can choose to stay anonymous if it is more acceptable to them. The users can also attach additional documents and photos to their posts.

For people who like to receive postings via e-mail, the forum offers an e-mail alert service of new posts which the user can subscribe to by simply

leaving an e-mail address here: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/subscribe>.

Alternatively or in addition, one can subscribe to specific categories or topics after logging in and thereby follow specific discussions. The SuSanA secretariat is also providing a monthly overview of discussed topics via the SuSanA news mail and in the news section of the homepage (www.susana.org).

Here are four examples of very active discussion threads so far:

- Faecal sludge management: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/categories/53-faecal-sludge-management>
- Mobile sanitation systems like Peepoo bags in Kenya or a new urine diversion toilet pot in Bangladesh: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/categories/52-mobile-solutions>
- Menstrual Hygiene Management, including the Ruby Cup business idea for a menstrual cup in Kenya: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/categories/24-menstrual-hygiene-management-mhm>
- Improving the factsheets of the

various SuSanA working groups: <http://forum.susana.org/forum/categories/6-susana-working-groups>

To ensure that the forum remains user-friendly and well-organised, several members of the SuSanA secretariat work on forum administration and quality assurance on a daily basis. However, there is still a lot of work that needs to be done to broaden the reach of the forum and to make more people aware of its existence.

“Efficient knowledge sharing and assisting those on the ground searching for information on sanitation issues are our main objectives for this forum,” says Elisabeth von Muench.

Comments and questions can be posted on the discussion forum or sent to: susana@giz.de.

Contact: Dr. Elisabeth von Muench, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Postfach 5180, 65726 Eschborn, Germany. Tel: + 49 - 61 96 - 79 1195; Fax: + 49 - 6195 - 80 79 1195. Email: elisabeth.muench@giz.de