

Combating the Practice of Open Defecation through Appropriate Communication Strategies in Rural India

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Abstract : Lack of awareness on the consequences of open defecation and myths and misconceptions related to use of toilets have led to the continued practice of open defecation in India. Government of India initiated a multi-pronged intensive communication campaign against the practice of open defecation in the last few years. The primary vision of this communication campaign was to provide increased demand for toilets and to ensure that all have access to safe sanitation. The campaign strategy included the use of mass media, group and folk media, and interpersonal communication to expedite achieving its objectives. The campaign included the use of various media such as posters, wall writings, slides in cinema theatres, kiosks, pamphlets, newsletters, flip charts and folk media to bring behavioural changes in the communities. The author did a concurrent monitoring and process documentation of the campaigns initiated by the state of Tamilnadu, India between 2013 and 2016 commissioned by UNICEF India. The study was carried out to assess the effectiveness of the communication campaigns in combating the practice of open defecation and promote construction of toilets in the state of Tamilnadu, India. Initial findings revealed the gap in understanding the audience and the use of appropriate media. The first phase of the communication campaign by name as Chi Chi Chollapa (bringing shame concept) also revealed that use of interpersonal communication, group and community media were the most effective strategy in reaching the rural masses. The failure of various other media used especially the print media (poster, handbills, newsletter, kiosks) provides insights as to where the government needs to invest its resources in bringing health-seeking behaviour in the community. The findings shared with the government enabled to strengthen the campaign resulting in improved response. Taking cues from the study, the government understood the potency of the women, school children, youth and community leaders as the effective carriers of the message. The government narrowed down its focus and invested on the voluntary workers (village poverty reduction committee workers VPRCs) in the community. The effectiveness of interpersonal communication and peer education by the credible community worker threw light on the need for localising the content and communicator. From this study, we could derive that only community and group media are preferred by the people in the rural community. Children, youth, women, and credible local leaders are proved to be ambassadors in behaviour change communication. This study discloses the lacunae involved in the communication campaign and points out that the state should have carried out a proper communication need analysis and piloting. The study used a survey method with random sampling. The study used both quantitative and qualitative tools such as interview schedules, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions in rural areas of Tamilnadu in phases. The findings of the study would provide directions to future campaigns to any campaign concerning health and rural development.

Keywords : appropriate, communication, combating, open defecation

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