

# Flying toilets still airborne

Highlights of an article by Joyce Mulama published by Inter Press Service News Agency ([www.ipsnews.net](http://www.ipsnews.net))

An overflowing pit latrine empties its contents in a thick stream of worm-infested filth at the doorstep of Catherine Kithuku's home in Matopeni, a slum on the outskirts of the Kenyan capital, Nairobi.

Less than ten such latrines serve a population of two to three thousand people in this area. Typically, the latrines are housed in dilapidated structures which have cracked stone floors, rusty sheets of iron for walls, and roofs made up of torn plastic and cartons.

Small wonder, then, that many inhabitants of Matopeni still use "flying toilets" in their moment of need. The topic of much press coverage in recent years, these "toilets" are plastic bags into which people defecate, then throw away as far as possible. Out of sight, out of mind, it could be argued -- but for the fact that the toilets seldom remain out of sight.

Heaps of tightly-tied polythene bags adorn the roofs of mud-walled shanties, attracting swarms of flies. Some have burst upon landing, while others clog the drainage system in Matopeni. Open sewers meander through the slum, giving off a choking stench.

"This is the trend (as) there are insufficient toilets to serve the people here. Besides, the latrines are all full and it will be a while before the residents contribute funds to hire someone to empty the latrines," Kithuku told IPS. Fears abound that the unsanitary conditions will lead to disease.

"We have been praying that no outbreak catches up with us. We are particularly afraid in the rainy season since when it rains, the drainage full of human waste comes into our houses," said Teresia Kamene, another resident of Matopeni. "This is when children play with the filth; some even swim in it."

The lack of sanitation facilities also poses risks to the security of girls and women. "Where there are no latrines, girls and women have to wait until it is dark for them to look for a place to defecate. This means they have to walk a long distance, even 30 to 40 metres, to relieve themselves -- and they could be raped or mugged in the process," said Vincent Njuguna, a project officer at the Network for Water and Sanitation (NETWAS), a regional body based in Nairobi.

Four years ago, global leaders who gathered in South Africa to attend the World Summit on Sustainable Development promised to reduce by half the number of people who lack basic sanitation, by 2015. According to the United Nations, over 2.4 billion around the world are without adequate sanitation.

But, is this pledge translating into tangible improvements for people like Kithuku and Kamene? Developments in another Nairobi slum, Kiambiu, offer cause for hope.

The dilapidated pit latrines in this area, with a population of 40,000 to 50,000, are now being replaced with sanitation blocks, each of which comprises four modern toilets and two bathrooms, for men and women respectively.

In all, three blocks have been constructed -- this through a project run by Maji na Ufanisi ('Water and Development', in Swahili), a non-governmental organisation based in Nairobi. A fourth block is on the cards.

Residents have to pay a fee of six cents to use the toilet, and three cents to use the bathroom. But, this doesn't seem to have dampened enthusiasm for the project (according to official statistics, 56 percent of Kenyans live on less than a dollar a day).

"Before, human waste was strewn all over because there was no place to defecate," said Silas Okoth, chairman of the Kiambiu Usafi Group ('Cleanliness in Kiambiu').

"People used polythene bags or plastic containers which they would throw at the furthest place possible at night. One would just be walking at night and eventually get hit by one bag, or even two," he told IPS.

"But now, flying toilet cases have greatly reduced. The drainage is now cleaner, no clogging. In addition, disease outbreaks -- including cholera and diarrhea -- were so common, but not now."

Similar sanitation block projects are also being carried out in Nairobi's Kibera settlement, reportedly the largest slum in sub-Saharan Africa.