

## Triumph over Pit Latrines near Yet Far

*South Africa is poised to turn the corner in eradicating pit latrines in educational facilities before the UN-designated year of 2030, writes Angie Motshekga.*

On World Toilet Day, November 19, 2023, it is imperative to reflect on the critical role of sanitation in educational and social development to restore dignity while ensuring the safety of learners and educators.

The Sanitation Appropriate for Education (SAFE) initiative, spearheaded by the Department of Basic Education (DBE), represents a significant undertaking. It transcends the mere elimination of pit latrines, addressing broader issues at the core of adequate educational infrastructure and well-being.

This reflection comes when we're emerging from the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impacted all aspects of life, including the progress of essential sanitary projects in schools.

Sanitation, fundamentally linked to human dignity, is critical to global health and well-being. The World Health Organization (WHO) underscores that safe drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene ([WASH](#)) are not only essential for health but also contribute significantly to livelihoods, school attendance, and the dignity of individuals, fostering resilient communities in healthy environments. Human Rights Watch [amplifies](#) this, stating that the right to sanitation, a derivative of the right to an adequate standard of living, ensures everyone is entitled to sanitation services that provide privacy and uphold dignity.

The World Bank emphasises the necessity of investing in sanitation to prevent needless deaths, improve lives and livelihoods, and uphold human dignity. This is particularly poignant considering that around 4.2 billion people live without access to safely managed sanitation, with women and girls often bearing the brunt of this deprivation. The Hunger Project further [highlights](#) that a lack of access to sanitation is not only a health issue but also a matter of safety and human dignity. Sanitation is now a [global priority](#), and efforts are being made to educate communities about its importance and to provide sustainable solutions like eco-toilets.

Additionally, improvements in sanitation, as part of the broader [WASH](#) framework, are fundamental to enhancing people's living standards. These improvements yield numerous benefits, including better physical health, environmental protection, improved educational outcomes, time savings, and the assurance of a life of dignity, ensuring equal treatment for all genders.

The pandemic highlighted the importance of hygiene and sanitation, which the DBE had been addressing through its emergency water programme and the SAFE initiative. The latter, albeit delayed by the pandemic, has been a pivotal project to transform the sanitation facilities in South African ordinary public schools.

SAFE's objective is not just a replacement of outdated pit latrines but a complete overhaul of the sanitation infrastructure in line with the Norms and Standards for school infrastructure. This overhaul is not merely about installing new toilet seats, which are determined by learner enrolment and include age-appropriate facilities for primary schools and those catering to the disabled. The scope of SAFE is extensive, encompassing the assessment of existing sanitation

facilities, de-sludging and demolition of old pit toilets, construction of new, appropriate toilets, provision of rainwater harvesting systems, and the construction of accessible walkways.

This initiative, launched by President Cyril Ramaphosa in August 2018, underscores the power of collaboration for social change. It brought together an array of partners from both the public and private sectors, including Amalooloo, Assupol, AVBOB, Norcros, and international actors like the embassies of the Republic of Korea and the United States of America. This collective effort has resulted in the delivery of 126 projects out of a pledged 184. The diversity and innovation seen in these partnerships have been crucial in tailoring solutions to meet various needs, embodying the ‘stronger together’ ethos.

Alongside SAFE, the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI) targeted 1087 sanitation projects, all of which have been completed. This achievement signifies not just a quantitative success but a qualitative shift in the educational experience for millions of previously disadvantaged school children. The inclusion of children at the Grade R level in the education system underscored the need for age-appropriate sanitation facilities, a demand that SAFE has been addressing.

To date, 2978 out of 3898 SAFE projects have been completed since the program’s intensification in 2019. This progress is significant, considering the interruptions caused by the pandemic. More than just constructing facilities, SAFE emphasises the importance of hygiene education, ensuring that schools are equipped with better sanitation and the knowledge to maintain these standards.

The urgency of this mission aligns with the United Nations’ UN Water directive, which starkly reminds us that to meet the sanitation target of SDG 6 – safe toilets and water for all by 2030 – the world needs to accelerate its efforts. The DBE, with an expenditure of nearly R 3.7 billion, is confident in meeting these goals within the next two financial years, showcasing a commitment to transforming the landscape of school sanitation in South Africa.

In conclusion, the SAFE initiative is a testament to the power of collaborative effort in addressing critical social challenges. It goes beyond mere infrastructure development, encompassing a holistic approach that includes partnership, innovation, and education.

On this World Toilet Day, as we reflect on the strides made, we are reminded of the ongoing journey towards ensuring that every child has access to safe and dignified sanitation. This fundamental right underpins their health, educational success, and future prospects. It is about our people’s inherent right to dignity. We dare shall not fail.

*\*Angie Motshekga is the longest-serving Minister of Basic Education in South Africa, post 1994*

1. [https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash#tab=tab\\_1](https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash#tab=tab_1)
2. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/04/19/sanitation-global-right#:~:text=The%20right%20to%20sanitation%2C%20which,ensure%20dignity%2C%20and%20that%20are>
3. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/water/world-toilet-day-2020-and-why-sanitation-matters#:~:text=Investing%20in%20sanitation%20is%20necessary,the%20most%20of%20rom%20this%20deprivation>

4. <https://thp.org/news/world-toilet-day-ensuring-sanitation-for-all/#:~:text=A%20lack%20of%20access%20to,toilets%2C%E2%80%9D%20training%20community%20members>
5. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK525207/#:~:text=Safe%20drinking%20water%2C%20sanitation%2C%20and,for%20both%20men%20and%20women>