

SixDegrees

The ideal gift: a toilet?



At Christmas, what can you give someone who already has everything they need? Why not buy on their behalf something that someone else might need desperately - a toilet. A scheme run by the Global Dry Toilet Club of Finland allows sponsors to support a low-tech sanitation scheme in rural Zambia.

There is an urgent need for safe sanitation around the world. More than two and a half billion people have never used a proper toilet in their lives. At the turn of the millennium, the United Nations resolved to halve the number of people without acceptable sanitation facilities by 2015, but this goal will be hard to meet without generous help from rich countries.

Earlier this year, the 2nd International Dry Toilet Conference was organised in Finland to promote effective but inexpensive dry compost toilet technologies. These eco-loos can be as clean, hygienic and stylish as conventional toilets. Many examples are already in use at holiday homes around Finland.

Literally dying to go to the toilet

The greatest need for dry compost toilets is in the developing world, where millions of people suffer from serious and even fatal diseases spread by poor sanitation and contaminated water.

Flushing toilets are an extravagantly expensive and wasteful use of water. In many parts of the world there just isn't enough money or enough precious water to set up sanitation systems like those we enjoy in wealthy western countries.

What's more, the way we unthinkingly flush away our faeces every day is a shameful waste of rich organic matter. The nutrient-rich materials that are gradually decomposed in the enclosed containers of compost toilets can be safely spread on crops as free natural fertiliser – as long as they are carefully stored and treated. One of the big ideas behind compost toilet technologies is to treat human excrement and urine as valuable resources, rather than useless wastes.

Relief for locals in Kaloko

A new Finnish project aims to bring ecological sanitation to villages in the Kaloko region of Zambia, one of the poorest countries in the world. Almost 60% of Kaloko's 10,000 residents have no toilet facilities at all, 40% use basic pit latrines where wastes soak into the soil. Only a third have access to safe water.

According to Asta Rajala, Chair of the Global Dry Toilet Club of Finland, the new latrine designs include built-in containers that enable wastes to be collected and then recycled as fertilisers. "The new toilets will help local people in two ways – by preventing the spread of disease-causing pathogens, and also by providing fertiliser that can be used to produce more vegetables and improve nutrition," says Rajala.

"The most urgent need is in local village schools, as educating children about hygiene and nutrition is also an important part of the project," explains Rajala.

“The idea is that information will then be passed on to adults about how to use and look after the toilets, and how to apply their precious organic contents as fertilisers.” It is hoped that when people see how effective the simple toilets are, more families will want to build their own. Toilet designs have been adapted to suit the local culture, and to take advantage of locally available materials.

“In our Christmas campaign we’re asking people to make one-off donations, or become toilet sponsors, which would mean they have a toilet of their own in Zambia. It’s a bit like having your own theatre seat – except that lots of other people will also benefit when you’re not there to use the toilet yourself,” laughs Rajala.

See the website of the Global Dry Toilet Club of Finland <http://huussi.net/sambia> (in Finnish) for details about how to help provide potentially life-saving toilets in rural Zambia.



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