

**Inter Country Working Group Meeting
19-20 August 2009, Hotel Samrat, Chanakyapuri, New Delhi**

Inaugural Address – 19th August, 2009

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It gives me great pleasure to inaugurate this meeting. I welcome all the delegates to this SACOSAN Inter Country Working Group meeting.

Sanitation has a strong connection not only with personal hygiene but also with human dignity and well-being, public health, nutrition and education. Mahatma Gandhiji's call that "Sanitation is more important than independence" is more than relevant even today. He made cleanliness and sanitation an integral part of the Gandhian way of living. His dream was total sanitation for all.

Daily thousands of children aged five years and below die in developing countries due to diarrhoea caused by poor sanitation. Many other diseases like cholera, typhoid, polio, infectious hepatitis are also transmitted due to lack of good sanitation. One of the causes of high levels of malnutrition among children is the poor nutritional absorptive capacity due to lack of sanitation and hygiene. The loss due to lack of sanitation in terms of National Income has been estimated at between 2% to 7% for different countries. It is against the background of this unseen emergency, that we are meeting here.

You must be aware that the Report of the Joint Monitoring Programme for Drinking-water Supply and Sanitation, published jointly by WHO and UNICEF as per the status in 2006, has placed South Asia as the region having the highest rate of open defecation in the world. At 48 percent this rate is much higher than in sub-Saharan Africa at 28 percent people. Of the 1.2 billion people in the world defecating in the open, about 778 million people, reside in southern Asia. UNICEF in its State of Asia-Pacific's Children Report of 2008, says that achieving the MDG is dependent largely on achievements of India and China in health, nutrition, water and sanitation, education, gender equality and child protection.

These reports from the global community have also accepted that we in India have progressed tremendously in the last 5-6 years, but also suggest that we have to go a very long way. As far as we are concerned, the biggest challenge has been effective and sustainable delivery of sanitation services at the grassroots level. The Government of India, through its flagship programme of Total Sanitation Campaign has been able to enhance the sanitation coverage in rural areas from a mere 1% in 1981 to 59% approximately, today. More and more people are now using improved toilet facilities - that is, facilities that ensure human excreta are disposed of in a way that prevents them from causing disease by contaminating food and water sources.

India is a complex and diverse country with 28 States, six hundred districts, more than five thousand blocks, and approximately six hundred thousand villages. Our country of more than one billion people speaks 18 different languages, with multiple cultural and religious beliefs. It is therefore necessary that to implement any development programme aimed at the personal level, the approach and strategy should take into account these facts. As I mentioned earlier, the biggest challenge before us has been to generate a grass-root movement in the country on sanitation issues, for effective service delivery. The subject of sanitation is not considered an acceptable topic to discuss in society, with religious and social taboos attached to it. It has been our effort to make people start talking about sanitation and toilets without shame.

To this end, we have specifically targeted the highest offices of the country, raising the issue of toilets with all Chief Ministers, with my colleagues in Parliament, with elected representatives in the States, to seek their active cooperation. At the grass-root of our political spectrum, our Local Government representatives, the Panchayats needed to be actively involved in sanitation promotion. To do this, an incentive scheme was launched - "Nirmal Gram Puraskar", to give a handsome financial incentive to Panchayati Raj Institutions which attain full sanitation coverage. We have tried to bring a sense of pride and competition among them, and to publicly recognize and celebrate their contribution. In the first year of the Awards, only 38 Gram Panchayats qualified, in the second year 770 panchayats qualified, while in the third year 4945 panchayats and in the last year 12276 panchayats were awarded. The popularly elected leaders at the village level – the panchayat president, is honoured for success in attaining full sanitation by our highest office, the President of India.

We have taken various steps to improve the implementation of the Total Sanitation Campaign in the States. There is today a strong focus on school sanitation along with inter-sectoral co-ordination among the Departments such as Rural Development, Education, Health, Women and Child Development, Tribal Development, Social Justice and Empowerment, Ministry of New & Renewable Energy Source. A National level media campaign has been launched through the National TV Channel and All India Radio and focus is being given on inter personal communication at the grass root level. For capacity building a network of resource centers has been identified throughout the country, and is used for training of Masons, Panchayat members, Teachers, Motivators and other stakeholders. We are introducing the concept of solid and liquid waste management in each village. The guidelines are being further revised to give the required boost to Solid & Liquid Waste Management.

We are still developing innovative measures for promoting greater understanding between communities and policy makers. This is the real and continuing challenge before us. This Inter Country Working Group meeting is a good platform for sharing of experiences, best practices, learning in terms of successes and failures, and models of sustainable sanitation. I am very happy that the governments of South Asia are cooperating on the issues that really matter to our teeming millions.

This meeting has been organized to deliberate upon various steps taken by member countries as a follow up of the commitments made in the Delhi Declaration.

I hope you will carry forward the cooperative efforts made during the Third SACOSAN in this meeting.

I would like to end by wishing all the delegates a pleasant stay in our country and a successful meeting. Thank you.

Jai Hind.