

Information Is Key to Ending Open Defecation

Pairing toilet subsidies with behavior change communications significantly increases toilet use

Study Overview

To test if providing behavior change communications can improve the impact of subsidized toilet construction in areas where open defecation is still practiced, TCI researchers conducted a trial in 15 villages across Uttar Pradesh. The villages were divided into three groups. In one group, households were offered subsidized toilets (TCI paid 75% of the cost). In another, households were offered subsidized toilets and received educational and awareness-raising programming on sanitation and the dangers of open defecation. The third group received neither.

Background

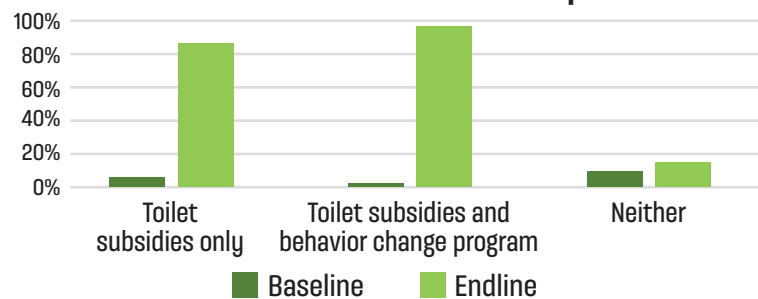
Open defecation can cause dangerous infections, such as diarrhea, as well as long-term health risks from malnutrition, especially in children. In 2019, India finished a long campaign to end open defecation by providing 600 million people with access to toilets. However, a 2022 report from the WHO and UNICEF found that 17% of rural Indians still openly defecate. Most of India's efforts to eradicate the practice focused on making toilets more affordable but did not address the lack of information about the harms of open defecation in rural communities.

RESULTS

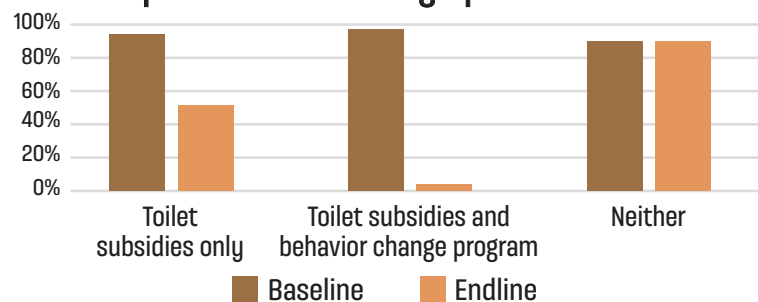
At the conclusion of the trial, open defecation decreased modestly in the villages that were only offered subsidized toilets, from 95% to 52%. In the villages that received both toilets and behavior change programming, open defecation was virtually eradicated, falling from 98% to 4%.

The villages that received behavior change programming also saw significant improvements in child health that the toilet-only villages did not. By the end of the study, the number of underweight children in the villages fell by 20%, coinciding with a 28% decrease in reported diarrhea cases.

Household Toilet Ownership



Respondents Practicing Open Defecation



POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Incorporate persuasive behavior change components along with toilet subsidies in sanitation campaigns.
- Prioritize sanitation in efforts to improve children's nutrition and healthy development.

Seth, P. and Pingali, P., Addressing Information and Credit Barriers to Making India Open Defecation Free and Improving Child Health: Evidence from a Cluster Randomized Trial in Rural India, *PLOS One*, February 2025.

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