

Policy Briefing

Arts Interventions for Sustainable Sanitation and Resource Recovery

Many countries in the global South declare regions to be open defecation free (ODF), but they must still address significant sanitation, wastewater, and faecal sludge management challenges. Climate uncertainty, water shortages, and weak infrastructure mean that 'flush and forget' systems are not always possible or desirable. This briefing describes how art interventions can help people reimagine alternative sanitation futures. Drawing on research in Nepal, it describes how activities such as dance workshops, humanure planting, song competitions, and radio jingles can generate new knowledge about sanitation challenges and faecal sludge re-use, showing that 'brown' can be 'gold'!

Key messages

- In order to achieve access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene for all by 2030 (SDG 6.2), 'second-generation sanitation issues' such as wastewater recovery and faecal sludge management need to be urgently addressed in many parts of the global South.
- Technology alone cannot fix sanitation issues. They also require governments and communities to imagine, understand, and invest in their own sanitation futures.
- Arts approaches can play a valuable role in positive sanitation futures. This includes being used to promote resource recovery, and as a research tool to collaborate with, listen to, and influence stakeholders.
- Alongside art interventions on sanitation, local and national governments must commit to fund necessary changes in infrastructure. Without social and technical infrastructure change, arts intervention alone will have limited impact.

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Inclusive arts interventions (including song, dance, and humanure celebration) can help to meet a need to collectively value and understand sustainable sanitation.

What can arts interventions do to promote and understand sustainable sanitation systems including resource recovery?

Signatories to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) must achieve access to safe water, sanitation, and hygiene for all by 2030 (**SDG 6.2**). But despite global advances in access to safe drinking water and toilets, significant challenges still remain in reaching this goal. In particular, 'second-generation sanitation issues', such as wastewater recovery and faecal sludge management, need to be urgently addressed in many parts of the global South. Technology alone cannot fix these issues because they also require governments and communities to imagine, understand, and invest in their sanitation futures.

Faecal sludge is rich in water, nutrients and organic compounds, but often this 'brown gold' remains hidden in the sludge. It is particularly important that the potential for faecal sludge use **as fertiliser for crops (humanure) or as biogas for cooking** is recognised and deployed. This involves addressing sociocultural, economic, political, environmental, and technical challenges and processes along the sanitation chain. The **Towards Brown Gold research project** focused on what off-grid communities need to move towards the safe recovery and re-use of faecal sludge. One strand of this large international, interdisciplinary research project involved exploring what arts interventions can do to address these challenges and promote resource recovery in sustainable sanitation systems.

The Towards Brown Gold research team held an international workshop, conducted an arts-for-development literature review, and delivered a set of inclusive arts activities in Nepal. Prior arts interventions in the sanitation sector have tended to focus on promoting basic hygiene, handwashing, and toilet usage. However, through these activities (outlined in more detail below) we discovered that (in conjunction with the right state intervention and building of crucial sanitation

infrastructure) arts approaches such as songs, plays, and radio jingles can have a valuable role to play in both researching and promoting positive sanitation futures. Arts interventions that we identified as particularly important in helping us move towards brown gold and positive, safe, and sustainable sanitation futures included:

- Dance, group song compositions, and Photovoice projects that can open dialogue with and increase the voice and visibility of marginalised groups in the sanitation chain (such as sanitation workers, women, people with disabilities, and children). This includes being used as a research tool to collaborate with, listen to and influence people, communities, decision makers, and service providers.
- Locally appropriate songs (including radio jingles) that can reach a wide audience at a low cost. These can share knowledge with communities, evoke experiences, and increase acceptability of resource recovery solutions by creating interest in faecal sludge re-use.
- Role play games, drama, and puppet shows can create new knowledge, move local debates from 'taps and toilets' to 'whole chain and systems', socialise the idea of safely managed sanitation, and enable people to visualise their sanitation futures.
- Creative humanure planting and murals illustrating wastewater recycling systems can help exhibit the value of wastewater re-use and faecal sludge as 'brown gold'.
- Song, movement, and painting can help calm people's limbic systems (the part of the brain involved in our behavioural and emotional responses). This is important, especially in disaster or emergency scenarios when people are more likely to act in 'hot-headed' ways that are instinctive or destructive. Calm limbic systems (that is, 'cool heads') are required for daily positive pro-social behaviour such as considerate toileting and faecal sludge disposal.

Arts for sustainable sanitation in Nepal

In the project, we developed a set of inclusive arts interventions with communities and municipalities. Two beautiful mud houses in Lumbini Peace Park were constructed (with separate funds to support local craftsmanship from the British Council Nepal) using local sustainable materials. Lumbini Peace Park was chosen as the site for the mud houses as it receives millions of visitors each year from Nepal and beyond. Using a traditional relief technique, **the houses were decorated with positive images of sanitation** (including the sanitation value chain and the need for sealed toilet pits). We recruited a local coordinator and a local facilitator in conjunction with Integrated Development Society (IDS)-Nepal to create and deliver a programme of arts interventions with community, municipal, and school groups.

Over the course of a year, the project delivered from the mud houses included: humanure planting with school groups, a sanitation value chain poster competition, and a singing competition about safe sanitation resource recovery. In conjunction with the scientific researchers from the Towards Brown Gold project, we also created banners to hang inside the mud houses depicting the project's **research on sanitation and water quality in Gulariya, Nepal**, and current risks associated with untreated sewage and monsoon shit flow:

We are using the toilets with non-water sealed pit and we can now visualise the risk of water contamination after visiting the brown gold mud house. (Representative from Muslim Women's community group)

Further substantive activities included:

1. A radio jingle by traditional Nepali folk singer Karna Bahadur Gandharba, aired on local FM stations in Nepali and Awadhi to promote safe management of faecal sludge and the potential for shit re-use. It was aired at least eight times every day in prime hours. The majority of people

in Lumbini province depend on radio for news and other programmes related to education and health (**estimated reach 250,000**).

2. An inclusive arts dance intervention with 12 female sanitation workers performed at the **Women of the World Festival in Nepal**, April 2022 and to Lumbini Peace Park visitors and members of over 60 development organisations working in Nepal. The song and dance began to challenge the labels that stigmatise sanitation work and to promote the use of constructive associations.
3. A visit to the mud houses from municipal sanitation workers and sanitation entrepreneurs, which triggered a crucial discussion about local emptying practices and generated new knowledge about issues currently affecting this area; for example,

Most of the hotel owners directly discharge the faeces to the drain which is very dangerous... Previously, they used to call us [the sanitation entrepreneurs with tankers] and paid... As a matter of fact, they stopped calling us and we knew that they have been throwing directly into the drains. (Sanitation entrepreneur)

We expect the government to make a proper place to throw the faeces so that we can empty the toilet pit using our tanker without complications and public objection. (Sanitation entrepreneur)

Through this research we found that art can 'intervene' in sanitation solutions at a range of levels beyond just promoting handwashing – this includes being used to promote resource recovery, and as a research tool to collaborate with, listen to, and influence people, communities, decision makers, and service providers. Arts intervention can also be helpful in connecting people, exploring feelings, and encouraging engagement with the often difficult and embarrassing topics associated with sanitation.

Policy recommendations

Arts approaches can play a valuable role in positive sanitation futures if they are invested in alongside social and technical infrastructural changes by stakeholders.

The following recommendations are for local and national government stakeholders and NGOs:

- Humanure planting activities can be used to introduce communities to the concept of resource recovery and help them recognise faecal sludge as a potentially valuable resource rich in water, nutrients, and organic compounds.
- Programmers can use art intervention as a tool for engaging with and increasing understanding of sanitation issues (including the potential for brown gold, faecal sludge recovery), and to drive greater ownership of the future of sanitation. Alongside this, local and national governments must commit to funding necessary changes in infrastructure, as arts intervention on its own will only ever have a limited impact on outcomes.
- Art interventions for sanitation should be embedded in local culture, processes,

and institutions. This will strengthen the impact of the work, alleviate the risk of offensive content, and ensure greater likelihood of a sustainable sanitation legacy that responds to community priorities.

- Art aims to reach the soul, spirit, heart, limbic system, or the non-rational components of existence. To understand the value of art interventions in sanitation policy, those working on art/sanitation programmes must measure more than audience reach – there needs to be appropriate metrics for evaluation, a theory of change, and monitoring of progress over long timescales to measure effectiveness in changing sanitation-related perceptions or actions.
- Long-term programming should be used over short-term, one-off events. This programming should be implemented in partnership with key agencies that have knowledge of and are able to address power hierarchies in the community. It is also crucial to build long-term engagement with sanitation messaging behind the artwork. ■

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Further reading

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Park, J. (2017) 'Movements in Perception on Human Faeces for Transition Sanitation Design, Using Convergence of Science and Arts', unpublished PhD thesis

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