

Sustainability News – 13th December, 2016

Five west African countries have announced measures to end the practice of European oil companies and traders exporting “African quality” diesel – highly polluting fuels that could never be sold in Europe.

Swiss commodity traders were accused in a [report published in September by Swiss NGO Public Eye](#) of exporting fuels to west Africa with Sulphur levels that are sometimes hundreds of times higher than European levels.

The report accused oil companies of “regulatory arbitrage”, allowing traders and companies to exploit weak standards to export cheap, dirty fuels in a process that Public Eye said was maximising profits at the expense of African’s health. High-sulphur fuels are major contributors to respiratory diseases such as bronchitis and asthma.

Dirty diesel from European Companies fuels pollution in Africa – in pictures

Last week Nigeria, Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Ivory Coast agreed to ban imports of high-sulphur diesel fuels as part of an initiative organised by the UN Environment Programme. Permitted levels of sulphur in imported diesel will fall from as high as [3,000 parts per million \(ppm\)](#) in some of the countries to 50 ppm. In Europe, the maximum has been 10 ppm since 2009.

There is nothing illegal about the practice exposed by Public Eye’s report, and the blending of fuels to achieve specifications before export is standard industry practice. Companies identified in the report said they comply with the fuel standards imposed by the governments they ship to, and support efforts, including those by the African Refiners Association, to improve fuel standards.

Erik Solheim, the head of UN Environment, said: “West [Africa](#) is sending a strong message that it is no longer accepting dirty fuels from Europe. Their decision to set strict new standards for cleaner, safer fuels and advanced vehicle emission standards shows they are placing the health of their people first.”

He said the decision set an example for others to follow, adding: “Air pollution is killing millions of people every year, and we need to ensure that all countries urgently introduce cleaner fuels and vehicles to help reduce the shocking statistics.”

Air pollution more deadly in Africa than malnutrition or dirty water, study warns

Nigeria’s environment minister, Amina Mohammed, said the decision would lead to major improvements in air quality. “For 20 years [Nigeria](#) has not been able to address the vehicle pollution crisis due to the poor fuels we have been importing. Today we are taking a huge leap forward ... this will result in major air quality benefits in our cities and will allow us to set modern vehicle standards.”

The five countries also agreed to upgrade their national refineries to bring locally produced diesel up to the same quality by 2020.

Oliver Classen, spokesman for Public Eye, said the decision to raise fuel standards following the report and campaign was encouraging. “The improvement of air quality in African cities and the protection of people’s health is possible. It needs neither rocket science, countless measures, or lengthy negotiations. But governments need to act and the time to act is now,” he said.

He called on the government of Switzerland, where most of the major commodity trading companies are headquartered, to impose “mandatory human rights and environmental due diligence standards”, adding: “It should cover the entire supply chain and including potentially damaging products.”

Many of the fuel exports revealed by Public Eye are shipped from Dutch ports, and the decision was praised by the Dutch foreign trade and development cooperation minister, [Lilianne Ploumen](#).

“The recent report from the NGO Public Eye made abundantly clear that coordinated action is needed to stop the practice of exporting dirty fuels to west Africa,” said Ploumen. “I am very pleased west African governments

quickly decided to introduce standards that will help accessing European standard quality fuels. Their people deserve cleaner air, better health and a cleaner environment.”

Toilets – we all need them!

Bill Gates once said that there are not enough smart people working in toilets. It’s not hard to see why people finishing school today don’t say, “I want to go and make toilets”. But it’s time for this to change. It’s time we open the eyes of the brightest young thinkers today and inspire them to choose to work in sanitation by showing them they can make a difference. Future engineers, scientists, psychologists, designers and entrepreneurs, there’s so much opportunity for the next generation to bring about life-changing transformation.

Perhaps we don’t realise the gravity of the need. We recognise the importance of clean water, of eliminating disease, but often in the Western world we don’t connect these things to sanitation. Or we deprioritise sanitation without realising the power it has to improve lives. 1 in 3 people - that’s 2.4 billion - live without access to proper sanitation. An estimated 800 children under 5 years of age die every day from diarrheal disease caused by a lack of hygienic water and sanitary living conditions. And all of this costs the global economy \$222.9 billion - over half of which is the result of death ([LIXIL & Oxford Economics](#)).

But sometimes numbers aren’t helpful. Imagine if you couldn’t go to the toilet at work because there wasn’t one. Imagine if you or your mother, sister or wife wasn’t able to relieve themselves at night for fear of being raped. Imagine if the girls in your family dropped out of school because they couldn’t face having to change sanitary products in public. Sanitation is something we take for granted, but these are very real situations that exist across the world today. And if there’s one thing I’ve learned in recent years, it’s the power of sanitation to put a smile on someone’s face. To give someone their dignity back.

The world missed the Millennium Development Goal to halve the proportion of the population without sustainable access to basic sanitation by nearly 700 million people ([World Health Organisation](#)). This despite substantial government action. And now we’ve set ourselves an even greater challenge: Sustainable Development Goal 6 - to ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for *all*. So, there’s a tremendous need to find solutions and this needs to go beyond government and business. Sanitation needs to be everybody’s business.

But our toilets aren’t suited to the contexts of those living without access. For instance, the typical ‘western-style’ flush toilet uses around 6 litres of water for each flush, which isn’t practical when 1/5 of the world’s population live in areas of water scarcity. That’s why when the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation called for innovative solutions, I, alongside many others, felt compelled to act.

I visited a village called Rajshahi in Bangladesh and spoke to people on the ground. What I saw was a need for simple, water-saving innovations that the local community could rally behind. I learned that it wasn’t about re-inventing the wheel. There is a power in simplicity. That’s something that guided me in developing the first SATO - a plastic toilet that sits on top of open pit latrines and features a counter-weighted trap door that quickly seals to prevent smell and keep insects away, preventing disease.



And after we delivered the second iteration of the SATO, I remember being humbled by the reaction of those in Uganda and Rwanda, who were amazed that it was possible for their toilet not to smell. Several Rwandans commented how it was now possible to use the courtyard-like areas around their toilet. But the most memorable moment was when a 13-year old girl said to me, "We used to put up a curtain and queue outside waiting to use the toilet. We used to get injured by the broken iron sheets. The ones we have now; they are very good. Boys can't see us and they're clean." This was the moment I knew the work we were doing, finding innovative ways to reach the unserved, was vital.



Then there is the novel thinking in terms of behaviour change. 946 million across the world defecate in the open. Of these, 564 million live in India ([Team Swachh Bharat](#)). And often this isn't because they have to. It's the norm in many rural villages. For product innovations to be effective we also need to create demand for toilets. That's why I'm excited to see ideas emerging from others in the [Toilet Board Coalition](#) as to how we can do this, from introducing tech into toilets, enticing people to use them, to programmes that reward people for using a toilet. Public toilets that clean themselves, that generate and conserve power, that are also Wi-Fi hotspots or provide mobile phone re-charging points...and I'm still talking about developing markets here. We should be excited for the future.

Unless we change attitudes towards the toilet industry and get our best minds, entrepreneurs, businesses, governments, and charities to work together the costs of poor sanitation are just going to increase and the greater tragedy is the human cost.

I hope the world will take note this World Toilet Day, and that maybe one more young mind will choose to help change the world.