In 2015, UN member countries adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – a roadmap for a more inclusive, equitable and sustainable world by 2030. The Global Goals are our chance of fixing what’s broken and creating a brighter and more prosperous future for all.

The Goals can create a life of dignity and opportunity for all while offering a huge potential to boost profitable growth for businesses everywhere, working within the boundaries of the planet. Every organisation will benefit from operating in a more equitable, resilient world. There is no business case for enduring poverty.

Within our own activities we have identified where Unilever has the biggest potential to contribute to the SDGs using the reach and scale of our organisation and how this will add value to our business at the same time. Through our Unilever Sustainable Living Plan (USLP) and our transformational change agenda we are doing our part to achieve the overarching goal of a ‘zero poverty and zero carbon’ world.

Access to water and sanitation is one of the most pressing challenges of our time. Today 2.5 billion people still lack effective sanitation and good hygiene facilities. The sustainable provision of safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene is essential to achieving the SDGs.

As part of our USLP, we have set an ambitious goal to reach 1 billion people by improving their health and well-being. With our Lifebuoy handwashing behaviour change programme and our ‘Help a Child Reach 5’ campaign, we have reached 337 million people since 2010. As part of our commitment, we have also set a goal of helping 25 million people gain improved access to a toilet by promoting the benefits of clean toilets and by making toilets accessible.

We are committed to achieving this target and contributing to driving progress against the SDGs, but we cannot do this alone. We must work together to create a brighter future for all.

PAUL POLMAN
Chief Executive Officer, Unilever

INTRODUCTION

With a population of 1.3 billion and accelerated urbanisation, India faces immense pressures on its cities. As a result, its slum population has more than doubled in the past decade and is projected to continue growing. This growth poses challenges for communities to access water, hygiene and sanitation. Improving access to these basic needs is essential to offering people a better life.

We know that simple changes can make a big difference: washing hands with soap; providing safe drinking water; and building and maintaining clean toilets. With our portfolio of health and hygiene brands, Hindustan Unilever is well placed to tackle these challenges in India. Through our brands and affordable products, we are working with partners to promote life-saving behaviours.

Since 2010, Lifebuoy’s handwashing programmes have reached over 65 million people in India, and since 2005 Pureit has provided 70 billion litres of safe drinking water through its purification devices. Our Domestos toilet cleaner brand, known as Domex in India, is also working with governments and partners to help support access to improved sanitation.

However, to accelerate progress on Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) and the SDGs, we questioned our current thinking on WASH issues: what solutions can we provide to address the SDGs in an urban context? With this mindset, we developed a new approach to doing business. Whilst many people may think of us as a company that sells products, sustainable development requires us to think about services, new types of collaboration, innovation and partnership.

SANJIV MEHTA
CEO & Managing Director, Hindustan Unilever

In 2016 we launched the Suvidha (‘convenience’) Centre, the first of what we hope will be many community hygiene centres in India. The Centre offers handwashing, showers, washing machines and safe drinking water to the local community. What is more, the Suvidha Centre considers the environmental impact of water. Through innovative design, it uses a closed-loop approach to re-using water. Water recycling is an integral part of the design of the Centre, from harvesting rainwater from the roof, through to treating and re-using grey water from showers and laundry to flush the toilets.

This pilot project is just the start and something of a bold experiment for us as a company. We believe that tackling the WASH challenge will not only save lives but it will also create market opportunities. It is helping us to better understand how to grow our business whilst increasing our positive social impact and reducing our environmental impact.
By then, around 1.3 billion people will be living in slums. This number has doubled since 1990. More than 700 million lack access to improved sources of drinking water. Despite some progress, rapid urbanisation means that these slums are growing faster than the challenges are being solved.

Today, half the world lives in cities. Nearly 30% of these urban residents live in slums. It’s been estimated that are scalable, collaborative and equitable.

Almost in urban areas, access to improved drinking water sources is not simply one of health or hygiene. As the global population grows further, the rate of demand for water is expected to increase even faster. As there are many competing demands for water, such as food and energy production, industrial processes as well as domestic uses. But often the marginalized people are the ones who lose out in the fight for water, meaning that there is less water available for domestic use in vulnerable communities.

Lack of access to water has a big impact on sanitation and hygiene. Poor sanitation, in turn, poses numerous problems. For example, the contamination of drinking water when open human waste is thrown into open drinking water sources.

Contaminated drinking water causes cholera epidemics, fatal viral diseases, typhoid, typhus, dengue fever, and other sicknesses. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that one in four slum children suffer from diarrhoea at least once a fortnight. Women and girls are most severely affected by inadequate facilities in addition to bearing the burden of collecting water. The interconnected challenges of water, sanitation and hygiene cause millions of preventable deaths every year worldwide, as well as tremendous hardships for the growing population of the urban poor.

Today, the urban poor are the most vulnerable victims of climate change. As the country with the longest toilet tradition in the world, India, according to the United Nations, has 750 million slum dwellers, almost one billion, which are not recognized by the government.

Mumbai, the capital city of the Indian state of Maharashtra, houses one of the largest slum areas in the world. Mumbai is home to nearly 25% of India’s slum population. In 2015, India was ranked by WaterAid as the country with the longest toilet queue. It suffers from a lack of functional toilets, meaning that a large number remain unused and open defecation continues as a well-established practice. Poor construction and maintenance of toilets results in loss of ownership and responsibility for those facilities, which leads to poor maintenance and increased faecal contamination.

In many cases, toilets do not function properly due to blockages in sewers, lack of adequate wastewater generation and failure of the sewage system. When flushing does not prevent contamination and reduce odours. It is a challenge to ensure that there is adequate wastewater supply and enough sewer services to guarantee the safety of those using slums, which are not recognized by the government.

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SUVIDHA: THE UNILEVER COMMUNITY HYGIENE CENTRE

The Suvidha Centre, which is located in one of Mumbai’s most challenging slums, provides a holistic approach to the issues of poor personal hygiene, lack of sanitation facilities, lack of safe drinking water and poor sanitation. The community centre provides WASH services at significantly lower costs than market rates.

The Centre also promotes a safe and well-facilitated environment for everyone. A secure and safe children’s play area has been built on the roof and there are separate entrances for women and girls, which can be accessed at night.

The Suvidha Centre has been designed with careful consideration of the environmental impact of water use. The design is based on a circular economy approach to water using innovative technology to harvest rainwater from the roof and recycle water from showers, reduce overhead showers and separate bathing areas with soap. Low-flow shower heads and push valves help to save water.

We built the Centre in 2016 with our partners, Mumbai Municipal Body and Pratha, a non-proft community based organisation. The project was devised, developed and built in close consultation with the local community. It is a community centre that meets many needs, catering for over 1,500 people. It is a market-based solution, mostly designed to be affordable and replicable.

PAY PER USE IN INDIA

Pay-per-use facilities are normal across India. For example, many households spend 30-50 rupees per day and end up to 90 rupees per day on a monthly family pass. Children will have free access to the toilets. Laundry facilities and safe drinking water will also be offered at much lower rates than typical market rates.

With the Suvidha Centre, Unilever has clearly articulated a practical example of how to respond to the SDGs in a way that is aligned to commercial objectives. The challenge is how to scale this model reach millions, for example the slums of India. The Suvidha Centre is a model of excellence, design and impressive expertise of big business with the required small business flexibility and community buy-in to be scaled up. This approach is expected successfully in the scale of millions of new users across areas to learn from and scale the Suvidha Centres across the world.

Neil Jeffery
Director, Public Affairs & Water & Sanitation for the Urban Poor (WSUP)
Access to drinking water, sanitation and hygiene is a fundamental human right. Achieving the SDGs and delivering on the human rights to water and sanitation are critical to achieving the SDGs and fundamental to the growth and development of all communities.

Unilever has been at the forefront of developing market-based solutions which will identify and develop business models which aim to mobilise greater business participation in delivering Goal 6. Market-based approaches and business-model innovations can play a critical role in achieving the SDGs. All stakeholders must work collaboratively to ensure different sectors can work together. We are working with other countries where the sanitation needs are great and we have a market opportunity to help at scale, including in South Africa, India and Brazil. We currently have a total of ten Sunlight Centres.

Every monastery and palace has been converted into a unilever’s suvidha centre. The Suvidha Centre is a community facility that has been built to the highest standards. The public toilets cater to over 1,500 slum dwellers and meet almost 80% of their basic water needs for laundry, showers and handwashing. The Centre is designed to be inclusive, with separate entrances for women and girls. Specific toilets open at night will reduce the risk of violence that so often presents at slum toilets. Post-field opportunities to run, clean and manage the centre.

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KEY LESSONS LEARNT

From developing the initial concept, through to opening our first Hygiene Centre, we have learned some key lessons along the way. We hope that these insights will be useful to others that want to adopt similar market-based solutions through novel, sustainable business models.

LESSON 1: CO-CREATE TO INNOVATE

The whole process of developing a new business model had to be as consultative as possible. We began with the end users. This was crucial to ensure that the approach was going to be useful. Co-creation with end-users in the community will help us make it a success. Having an inclusive process also helped with buy-in from local stakeholders and impacts a sense of ownership. Ultimately, getting all these insights from a wide range of different stakeholders – including end-users, regulators and other companies – helped us come up with a more resilient model.

LESSON 2: PARTNER TO REALISE THE OPPORTUNITIES

Unilever is not in the construction business. Nor are we architects, planning specialists, plumbers or carpenters. But we needed all these skills and more to build our first Hygiene Centre. We had to ask for help and draw on specialist skills. We learnt that identifying specialist subject matter experts who could understand the practical challenges and had experience delivering such projects was essential for progress.

Beyond just collaboration, we needed to enter formal partnerships to make our plans a reality. By partnering with local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) we were able to tap into the skills and networks of others. These groups often have a comprehensive understanding of community needs on the ground, and can help companies to navigate cultural sensitivities and political challenges.

As a company, Unilever is committed to working with partners based on a set of shared objectives and values.

LESSON 3: EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

With any project, there are always surprises. Doing something challenging and different made the surprises bigger. External factors included unexpected changes to scheduled plans due to fewer working days or the absence of local labour. Working in an area without planned infrastructure like water and electricity was a major challenge. There were many unknowns, from high tension wires that ran above homes to poor road quality near the ocean on reclaimed land.

Being flexible and ready to adapt to an unpredictable environment helped us navigate everything that came up. Preparing for unknowns in advance helped us put together teams to overcome the barriers. Above all, the project required patience, perseverance and optimism to make it a reality.

LESSON 4: HOW CAN WE SHARE THE FINANCING?

In India, the Swachh Bharat (Clean India) Mission is an instrumental role in helping to drive solutions. Financing these solutions will be a key part of the formula. We need providers of capital – like financial services firms and environmental specialists – to play their part in supporting such innovation. By working together, private sector, government and civil society can contribute more, faster.

1: How can we share the financing?

We should explore new models of shared financing to help entrepreneurs. Instead of the traditional model, we could change the structure borrowing facilities to help local communities develop their own service? Which financial entities could provide shared financing? Blended finance can enable more long-term approaches by pooling risk that delivers real social impact. We should explore new models of shared financing to help entrepreneurs. Instead of the traditional model, we could change the structure borrowing facilities to help local communities develop their own service? Which financial entities could provide shared financing? Blended finance can enable more long-term approaches by pooling risk that delivers real social impact.

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2: HOW CAN WE HELP MORE ENTREPRENEURS?

Entrepreneurs often have the insights, energy and networks to deliver on the ground. Specific funds could be set up to help small-scale entrepreneurs establish their own solutions. What if entrepreneurs were able to draw on to deliver a solution that meets a community need? This can not only tackle social issues but also trigger a new channel for improving livelihoods.

We are calling on others to adopt other market-based solutions that enable collective action to achieve the SDGs. Entrepreneurs often have the insights, energy and networks to deliver on the ground. Specific funds could be set up to help small-scale entrepreneurs establish their own solutions. We are calling on others to adopt other market-based solutions that enable collective action to achieve the SDGs.
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