



The Kalibo campaign, Gemena, Democratic Republic of Congo. Photo: John Kanani, 2017

# SANITATION MARKETING IN A FRAGILE CONTEXT

## Lessons from Gemena, Democratic Republic of Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) loses \$208m each year due to poor sanitation. The State as a duty bearer has limited capacity to act and improve the sanitation sector. In 2013–16 Oxfam developed a pilot sanitation marketing project for Gemena, a middle-size town in Sud-Ubangi province. Eighteen months after the project ended, Oxfam revisited Gemena. It learned that, while it is possible to implement a sanitation marketing programme in a fragile context, the two-and-a-half years of implementation in this case was not a long enough period for the market to sufficiently establish itself to become self-sustaining.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) loses \$208m each year due to poor sanitation.<sup>1</sup> This amount is equivalent to \$3 per person every year, or 1.6% of gross domestic product (GDP).<sup>2</sup> In 2013 Oxfam developed a pilot sanitation marketing project for Gemena, a middle-size town in Sud-Ubangi province in the northwest of the country. Sanitation marketing is an approach usually used in more stable countries, but the aim was to see whether using a market-based approach in a fragile state, where there is very limited State provision of services, could be a viable means of service provision. The pilot ran from September 2013 to June 2016. In November 2017, almost 18 months after the pilot finished, an Oxfam team revisited Gemena to see how well the sanitation market was doing. This case study documents their findings and what has been learned.

## 2 PILOT DESIGN

The pilot programme was designed to look at three key pillars: increasing consumer demand for improved latrines, increasing business opportunities for those willing to enter the sanitation market, and ensuring that other factors likely to influence the success or failure of a sanitation market were considered in the programme design in order to create an enabling environment (e.g. laws, regulations, finance options). First, a scoping study that looked at the existing sanitation situation in Gemena was carried out to help design the pilot programme.

## RESULTS FROM THE SCOPING STUDY

### Existing practices

The scoping study showed that 80% of households in Gemena had access to a latrine, but that the latrines were in poor condition and unhygienic to use. People reported that they did not like using latrines with a 'bad smell'. The remaining 20% of people resorted to open defecation.

Health messages are routinely used to emphasize the benefits of having and using a clean, hygienic latrine, but the scoping study showed that in Gemena tapping into feelings of embarrassment and pride was much more likely to be effective. Some households had 'good latrines' that they were proud of, and these were considered to be a symbol of status. People with 'bad latrines' were reportedly embarrassed by the state of them and would send visitors to use a neighbour's latrine instead of their own.

## Household economic profiling

Sanitation expenses (i.e. paying to build, maintain or improve the family latrine) were not a priority for households in Gemena. Expenses for school fees, food, health, community payments, clothes, transport, rent and business investments were all ranked as being more important. This is not an uncommon finding in sanitation programmes globally.

Education, religion or geographic location made little difference to people's responses. Households tended to derive their income from a variety of sources, mainly from jobs outside the household. These included regular employment, selling items at the market, running a small business or farming.

## The market

Issues around trust, particularly a lack of trust between different actors within the market system, were highlighted. Formal and informal associations exist for different kinds of trade and there is little competition between traders, who share ideas and business. Manufacturers of latrines felt trust in one another, but there was no trust between manufacturers and their suppliers, the government or other outsiders. Manufacturers will only use a supplier for a limited number of orders or for a limited time, and they are not willing to put their trust in a supplier in the long term by negotiating more permanent supply contracts. This way, they feel better able to manage the risk of a supplier going out of business or the relationship changing and negatively affecting their trade. Customers rely on personal inspection, expert advice or recommendations as guidance for buying. This is important because warranties are rarely given.

## Enabling environment

DRC has a national sanitation policy but its implementation is erratic and the national government is unwilling to take a strong lead in the sanitation sector. Research on governance conducted as part of the Oxfam programme highlighted that 'sanitation brigades'<sup>3</sup>, which are supposed to support sanitation improvements in communities, focus instead on fining households for not having a hygienic latrine. One of the biggest challenges of working in DRC is the level of taxation, both formal and informal. Formal taxes are those imposed on suppliers, traders and consumers by the State. Informal 'taxes' are imposed on suppliers, traders and sometimes consumers by civilians, mainly traditional leaders, and those in official roles, including government officials and military authorities. These 'taxes' have a negative effect on the market by increasing costs.

Supplies of materials come mainly through the Central African Republic (CAR) and through the northern provinces of DRC. The increase in conflict in CAR has pushed up the cost of raw materials.

# PILOT ACTIVITIES

## Stimulating demand

Based on the economic profiling of households, the seasonality of income and customer feedback, a 'mix and match' latrine model was designed for the Oxfam pilot project. The idea behind this was that customers could buy latrines one piece at a time, when they had the money available. The products were designed in an interactive way that involved potential consumers, taking account of their preferences and desires and of affordability, as well as the minimum technical requirements for safe excreta disposal. The latrines were displayed at a public demonstration site to allow community members to visit and comment on the designs. This site also served as the reference point linking suppliers to consumers.

Publicity campaigns, including radio broadcasts (264) sketches (72), public theatre shows (18), public video projections (eight), distribution of leaflets (14,000) and door-to-door marketing (8,000 households), were used to raise awareness of the new latrines. The 'Kalibo' brand (the name means 'Cleanliness above all') was created through a community competition, with the intention of making the issue of sanitation more visible and something that could be tackled collectively by communities.

## Supporting supply

There were no sanitation businesses as such in Gemena before the pilot, so the project looked for businesses and traders who were willing to engage in manufacturing and supplying latrine products. The programme provided training to existing businesses – 12 local businesses and 35 artisans and tradespeople – on developing business plans, finance, accountancy and marketing, along with practical guidance on how to build different products (mainly for builders, carpenters and welders). The demonstration site was established where customers could meet suppliers and view and interact with the products available. Support to the businesswomen and men was continued throughout the programme, addressing skills gaps, working through business plans and collectively discussing and addressing challenges.

## Supporting the enabling environment

Two steering committees were created: a local one responsible for leading the implementation of the programme within Gemena and a national one, responsible for advocating with the central and provincial governments on key sanitation issues, such as the detrimental effect that the practices of the sanitation brigades were having. The national steering committee had representatives from the Ministry of Planning, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Education, UNICEF and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), which was the donor for the pilot project.

Advocacy training was conducted, resulting in an advocacy strategy to be implemented by the steering committees, which prioritized informal, irregular taxation as the key issue to be tackled. A learning event was held in the capital Kinshasa, providing an opportunity for government representatives from the Ministries of Environment, Health, Finance and Planning to learn about the project and the innovative approach in the DRC context.

## 3 RESULTS OF THE PILOT

### **Demand**

A household survey (of 397 households) conducted after six months showed that 70% of respondents had better knowledge and awareness than before of the need for a hygienic latrine and they also listed having a latrine among the top three priorities for household expenditure, after health and education. The Kalibo brand was well received and easily understood, and 'How is your Kalibo?' became synonymous with discussions about the conditions of a latrine.

### **Supply**

Within six months, a total of 7,736 people visited the latrine showroom. Of these, 165 expressed a need to improve their latrines and were linked with suppliers, though only 45 products were sold.<sup>4</sup> The low uptake was due in part to the financial constraints faced by households as a result of low and seasonal incomes and limited or no access to credit. The pilot did not manage to address these constraints, and a financing component will be important for any larger-scale sanitation marketing programme.

Twelve local businesses and 35 builders and tradespeople were trained in business management; of these, six (businesses and individuals) applied to open bank accounts for their businesses.

### **Enabling environment**

High turnover of government staff made it difficult to engage with the authorities on a continuous basis for advocacy and messaging. However, the local steering committee was able to run the programme in Gemena, and the national steering committee provided a conduit for local stakeholders to engage with on national policy issues affecting the potential for market-based programming in DRC. The main successes for the committees were reducing the informal 'taxes' levied and changing the role of the sanitation brigades to be less punitive. Local civil servants learned about the provisions of the national sanitation policy through the activities of the steering committees.

An action plan has been developed by the government, listing guidelines for public accountability, and the provincial assembly has been involved in developing the policies and strategic plans necessary for implementation. A new provincial governor has been appointed, but the national sanitation policy has still not been made operational at the devolved administrative level.

## 4 FINDINGS 18 MONTHS LATER

### Demand

Fifteen households who bought a Kalibo product during the pilot programme were visited again in November 2017 to canvass their opinions on the products and what they remembered about the Kalibo advertising campaign. People remembered the campaign well, in particular the line '*Pesa libota nayo kilo; salela bango Kalibo WC ya peto*', which translates as 'Honour your family: build them a hygienic Kalibo latrine'. The brand is still marketed by individual businesses and builders, by the Institut Technique de Gemena (a local technical school) and on Radio Liberté, broadcasting from Kinshasa, and Radio Rurale de Gemena (RRG), Gemena's own local radio station.

Maman Jolie, a resident who bought a slab and superstructure, said: 'Kalibo is not only the construction of latrines, Kalibo introduced new ideas and technologies on how to improve sanitation conditions using local materials.'

Only one of the 15 households was unhappy with its Kalibo product; the customer regretted the decision to buy a model with a seat rather than a squat plate as he felt that it could lead to infections, especially for women. The other 14 households expressed satisfaction with their Kalibo products and have recommended them to others. The latrines are well kept, are clean, with no smell and no flies, and have covered pits, good superstructures and lockable doors. People are generally proud of their 'smart toilets'.

### Supply

The builders found the latrine showroom useful in promoting the Kalibo products for them, but it no longer exists. Oxfam found that the remaining products and materials had been distributed between members of the local steering committee and the local technical school once the pilot programme ended, as the steering committee could not afford to continue paying the rent or maintain the showroom.

Of the 12 local businesses and 35 builders and tradespeople originally trained, four businesses and six builders have sold a Kalibo product since June 2016. The four businesses have sold 14 products between

them, mostly Kalibo slabs. The six builders have had more success, selling 181 Kalibo products, including 38 complete latrines. This demonstrates that there is still a steady, if small, demand for better-quality latrine products in Gemena. Kalibo slabs are by far the most popular product, with many customers opting to hire additional labour to dig the pit and build the superstructure from locally available materials. Customers have included businesspeople, NGO employees, teachers and religious organizations.

The mix and match model has not worked for those with previously established businesses because owners could not afford to stock the full range of options. They focused on the slabs, as these are relatively cheap and easy to store, but they still took time to sell. One business owner felt that the products 'needed to be more competitive in the market' i.e. cost less and be more in line with aspirational demands (e.g. porcelain pedestals). Of six builders who applied, four were successful in opening bank accounts for their business but they have not been able to access additional financing, such as loans.

### **Key challenges facing businesses and builders**

- Depreciation of the local currency (the Congolese franc, or CDF) by approximately 44% over the year made the Kalibo products and related construction materials artificially expensive and therefore unaffordable for many.
- Some of the original sales were made on credit, and while repayments are being made against the original value of the products, the currency depreciation means that products cannot be restocked.
- Demand for the products has diminished significantly, and very little marketing has been done since the programme ended. The 2016 harvest was smaller than anticipated, due to a prolonged dry season, which exacerbated the problem of affordability for residents. Also, other NGOs operating in the Gemena area continue to provide slabs very similar to the Kalibo model for free, making it difficult to sell them as a product.

### **Enabling environment**

The local steering committee has become a legally registered entity, so it has a continuing presence in Gemena, but it has struggled to engage with provincial government representatives due to high staff turnover, political instability and the complexity of the sanitation marketing approach, which involves many actors with different interests in the process. One of the key areas of success for the committee has been in working with provincial authorities to identify formal and informal taxes levied on traders and consumers and highlighting the detrimental effect that informal 'taxes' can have. This is an ongoing challenge, with efforts supported by the Traders Association of DRC.

### **Local committee activities to date**

- The committee has taken the lead in organizing events around the annual celebration of World Toilet Day (19 November). The day is used as an opportunity to advocate for more engagement from the provincial government authorities.
- It has hosted broadcasts on the importance of health and hygiene on the local Gemena radio station, RRG.
- With support of the provincial government it has restructured the role of sanitation brigades in line with national policy, to be supportive of change rather than simply extracting fines from residents. The new structure is theoretically in place, but it needs to be validated by the provincial government to go into effect.
- It worked on the development of a provincial-level strategic plan for water, sanitation and hygiene during the period of programme implementation. This plan has been approved by the provincial arm of the Ministry of Health and incorporated into the Provincial Development Plan.

### **Challenges faced by the local steering committee**

- During programme implementation, the committee was operating without legal recognition, which made it challenging for it to act as lead implementer.
- The committee is now a voluntary entity, and participation has diminished significantly. It still acts as a conduit between Gemena residents and the government, but members rarely have time to follow up on points raised during steering committee meetings.
- There are no resources available to reopen the latrine showroom.

## **5 LESSONS LEARNED**

The key lesson from the Gemena pilot programme is that a sanitation marketing programme in a fragile context needs a longer period of implementation than two-and-a-half years. The pilot has shown, however, that it is possible to adopt a market-based approach in a fragile context. The local steering committee is still in existence and the Kalibo campaign is remembered.

Dealing with trust is also a key lesson. Systems in DRC have evolved to manage relationships in an unstable context. However, these systems are designed to mitigate risk rather than build relationships. The market approach needs to understand and work within a context where trust is in short supply.

### **Demand**

The Programme Villages et Ecoles Assainis (Clean Villages and Schools Programme), led by the Ministry of Health, is still the main national hygiene programme in DRC. Intended primarily for rural areas, this

programme's approach focuses on overall community welfare and includes the provision of free latrine slabs to households in a bid to improve the public health of communities. Gemena, despite being a town and not a rural setting, was targeted by the programme at the same time as the sanitation marketing approach was being trialled. While it has not been confirmed that this had an impact on the success of the market-based approach, it is reasonable to infer that the availability of free products very similar to those being marketed under the Kalibo brand is likely to have reduced potential sales of these products.

It is difficult to establish how big an impact the Kalibo campaign's wider messages about health and hygiene (beyond just having a latrine) have had on cleanliness and the health of the town's residents, but the Kalibo brand continues to be recognized, so the messaging was clearly memorable. Developed as it was via a community-based competition, it demonstrates the importance of 'knowing your audience' before creating a brand. Following the campaign, people changed their prioritization of spending on sanitation to the third most important household item, after school fees and food.

## **Supply**

Those who purchased Kalibo products were happy with the products themselves and the service received. However, the Kalibo products were considered expensive even before the currency devaluation, and a poor harvest exacerbated the problem of affordability for residents. Suppliers and builders were willing to extend informal credit to their customers, but doing so left them unable to restock and meant that they shouldered the whole risk of non-payment themselves. A lack of access to credit for both customers and suppliers limits the market potential for latrine products in an environment where incomes are dependent on harvests or on work in the informal sector. Many market-based programmes contain an element of financial support. This does not necessarily mean that products should be subsidized or that making micro-financing available is the answer. Experience from other market-based programmes around the world shows that it is worth investing time and resources in in-depth scoping studies looking at value chains, household economic profiling, market analysis and other factors to develop a financially viable business model as part of a market-based approach.

## **Enabling environment**

The programme ended up focusing much more on components of governance and the enabling environment than was originally anticipated. Trying to stimulate a market in a politically and economically unstable environment meant that Oxfam took on a significant portion of the activities required, meaning that once Oxfam left the programme was unsustainable. Nevertheless, during its implementation there were significant achievements, among them the inclusion of a market-based approach in the provincial strategic plan and the establishment of the local steering committee as a legal entity to act as a convener between traders, suppliers, builders, customers and provincial authorities.

The State as a duty bearer does not have the capacity to act and improve the sanitation sector in Gemena town or nationally. However, until such capacity is in place, the local steering committee can act as a convener between the public and local government to address local sanitation issues. A combined effort by the steering committee and civil society could be the most effective way to improve sanitation at the household level and, to a limited extent, to create capacity to improve the institutional environment provided by the State. Through this mechanism, it may also be possible for the steering committee to take on a role in other service delivery areas, mobilizing resources to implement the provincial development plan. Facilitating the relationship between local and national steering committees should be recognized as a key component of programme activities to strengthen channels between local issues and national duty bearers.

## **Programme set-up**

The programme required a new way of working for staff, and support to teams was required to do this. The research was conducted with Wageningen University & Research in the Netherlands which had some benefits for a short-term consultancy engagement, but also created challenges in terms of timing between the research done by the university and the information needed by the programme to begin implementation. Engaging in a market-based approach requires different skill sets, and analytical skills are of key importance. Financial modelling and an understanding of business planning and development, and how that all works within the context of implementation, are also critical elements. Oxfam needs to be better at finding the right partners who already have these skills, rather than trying to put in place all the elements of a market-based programme itself. This would allow it to take on a less direct implementation role, which hopefully would lead to a more straightforward exit strategy and more chance of the work started by the programme continuing after Oxfam's own exit.

# NOTES

- 1 World Bank (2012). *Economic Impacts of Poor Sanitation in Democratic Republic of Congo*. Water and Sanitation Programme.  
<http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTAFRICA/Resources/economic-impacts-of-poor-sanitation-in-africa-factsheet.pdf>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Sanitation Brigades are voluntary groups, affiliated to the Ministry of Health, who are given the role of supporting households to practice good health and hygiene. They are allowed to enact low level punitive actions (small fines) if household latrines are not constructed.
- 4 Oxfam records from the demonstration site (June 2016).

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