

## PUBLIC TOILETS IN CHENNAI

### SUMMARY

Sanitation is often called the “orphan MDG,” and India ranks among the worst countries in the world in terms of access to sanitation. In the city of Chennai, sanitation for the poor has not been articulated as a priority by city managers. Transparent Chennai – a project that collects and creates maps, data, and research about the city to empower citizens and increase government accountability - conducted extensive research on one aspect of sanitation for the poor i.e. public toilets, and our work revealed alarming findings. There are only 714 public toilets in the city of Chennai, for a population of 46.81 lakhs.<sup>1</sup>Of these 714, Transparent Chennai mapped and surveyed the 49 toilets in Zone 4. Despite evident need, we found that many toilets were not being used very much by women or children. This is because toilets are often poorly maintained, locked at night, charge user fees through a process of what appears to be informal privatization, and are located away from areas of greatest need, such as market areas, bus stops, areas with heavy pedestrian traffic, informal workplaces, and undeveloped slums. Budget allocations for public toilets are meagre, yet sometimes remain unspent. Data on public toilets are poorly maintained in the city, suggesting a poor knowledge base for adequate planning and monitoring of toilets. Interviews with government and civil society revealed that there is very little clarity on who is responsible for increasing access to sanitation for the poor, for public toilets, or for access to sanitation in informal, undeclared settlements, and that this lack of clarity applies to both the top and bottom levels of government. Transparent Chennai recommends that the government improve data about sanitation needs and government resources, use this data to spend more on toilets in a targeted manner, and to create lines of accountability on both public toilets and access to sanitation for the poor at all levels of government. The remainder of this issue brief summarizes the process, findings, and recommendations of the study on public toilets.

### BACKGROUND

The Centre for Development Finance organized a public consultation for informal sector workers in 2009 to enable them to provide inputs for the new City Development Plan. The meeting was attended by over 300 workers, more than half of whom were women, and who represented a wide range of organizations and professions in the informal sector. In articulating their various needs for city infrastructure, one key element that women workers emphasized was the need for public toilets at workplaces such as market areas, bus stops, and in underserved slum areas. Transparent Chennai decided to gather more information about public toilets in the city and how they are planned.

### NEED FOR THE STUDY

Chennai, though ranked higher than many cities in India in its performance on sanitation, still requires a great deal of improvement. Chennai received a score of only 53 out of 100 for sanitation and hygiene from the Ministry of Urban Development under the National Urban Sanitation Policy. The last Census, which likely undercounted poor households, counted a total of only 6.7 lakh latrines for a total population of 4.34 million. Assuming five people to a household, there is far less than 1 latrine per household (0.78). According to NFHS- 3, accessibility to a proper sanitation facility is much worse in slum areas than in non-slum areas; not even one out of every four slum households use improved sanitation facilities.<sup>2</sup>A survey of 3.2 lakh slum households in undeclared slums in the city published by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board in 2005 revealed that only 29% of residents in these slums had access to individual toilets or pit latrines, while 48% depended on public toilets and 22% used other means, including open defecation. But even these numbers understate the need for toilets in public places like bus stops and market areas,

<sup>1</sup> As per Census of India Provision Population Totals 2011

<sup>2</sup> National Family Health Survey III defines improved sanitation as something which includes flush/pour flush toilet to piped sewer system, pit latrine, or other improved sanitation facility that is not shared

especially for informal sector workers such as construction workers, street vendors, and small industry workers, who depend on public toilets for access to sanitation at the workplace. Particularly for women workers in the informal sector, the city's public spaces are their workplace, and increasing the number, location, and quality of public toilets may be one of the few concrete paths to improving their working conditions.

## METHODOLOGY

Transparent Chennai visited both the Corporation of Chennai (CoC), as well as all ten zonal offices in Chennai to collect number and location data for public toilets in the city. To corroborate this data, we filed an RtI with the Corporation, to which replies were received separately from each zonal office. We mapped and surveyed toilets in a single zone, Zone 4, to capture basic quality parameters, including presence of lights, water, electricity, structural integrity, cleanliness and others, and also conducted interviews with users and the caretaker at each toilet. Each toilet location was geo-referenced using GPS units, and close-up photographs of the amenities inside each toilet were taken. Transparent Chennai also interviewed officials at both the zonal and city level, as well as experts on sanitation, governance and the city.

## TOILET PROFILE: FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

### ▪ **Shortage of toilets relative to need:**

According to the city's responses to our RtI, Chennai only has a total of 714 public toilets, indicating an acute shortage of public toilets relative to need.

### ▪ **Poor data management and data inconsistencies:**

Chennai Corporation does not maintain a central repository of the number and locations of public toilets within the city; only the zonal offices have this information for their own zones. Our team also found discrepancies in information acquired directly from the zonal offices as compared to the data obtained through RtI request. Zonal data sourced directly from the offices listed a total of 572 public toilets while that from RtI totalled 714. Such discrepancies in raw data indicate a weak foundation on the basis of which plans and policies are formulated.

### ▪ **Toilets are underutilized, and why:**

Our survey and interviews with users and caretakers revealed low usage of toilets by women and children, a surprising finding despite the apparent need. Transparent Chennai identified the following reasons for low usage:

#### **1. Structural problems and lack of cleanliness**

Only 13 out of 49 toilets were documented as "clean and hygienic" by the field staff. All others were dirty, smelled bad, and required immediate attention by the caretaker. Basic support infrastructure like water, electricity and proper sewerage was missing in many of these toilets. Field staff also observed cracked ceilings, broken/no doors, poor garbage disposal, seepage and water stagnation in many of these toilets.

Of the 49 toilets surveyed, 6 had facilities only for men. One of these did have a women's section but this, too, was being used exclusively by men.

Approximately 50 per cent of the total toilets we surveyed had no bathing area in spite of apparent need -while 25 had no bathing facility, 3 did have this facility but they were unusable due to absence of doors and sewer blockage at the time of visit.

27 of the 49 toilets visited had no lights within each latrine and even in those which had bulbs or tubelights, it was difficult to verify if they worked. "We leave the doors open while using the toilet

because there is no light inside. There is no privacy,” said one of the respondents using a public toilet in Salaima Nagar, Ayanavaram.

Water supply was a common problem in most of the toilets and approximately 80 percent did not have 24 hours water supply. The worst example was the Ambedkar Nagar toilet, which had no water, all latrines were blocked, and appeared to be a breeding ground for flies. The caretaker of the toilet was being paid a regular salary by the Corporation, but was not able to administer the toilet properly as he lost his eyesight in an accident. The toilet compound was being used for used for smoking and drinking. This is just one example of poor management, but there were many other public toilets which suffered from similar problems which rendered the toilet unusable.

## **2. Toilets locked**

At night: Most of the toilets were found operational only during the day and kept locked at night, reportedly for safety reasons. 30 of the 49 toilets were reported as being locked after 8pm and just 10 other toilets were reportedly open all 24 hours. For the rest of the 9 toilets, we could not find out this information.

And permanently: 2 out of the 49 were locked permanently due to recurring sewer blockages, and the women’s section was not being used in a third toilet. 1 other toilet had been constructed 6 months prior to the visit, but had not yet been opened up for public use.

## **3. Caretaker absent**

18 out of 49 toilets had no caretaker or maintenance staff present at the time of visit to ensure that toilets are kept clean all day.

## **4. User charges for toilets, even in slums**

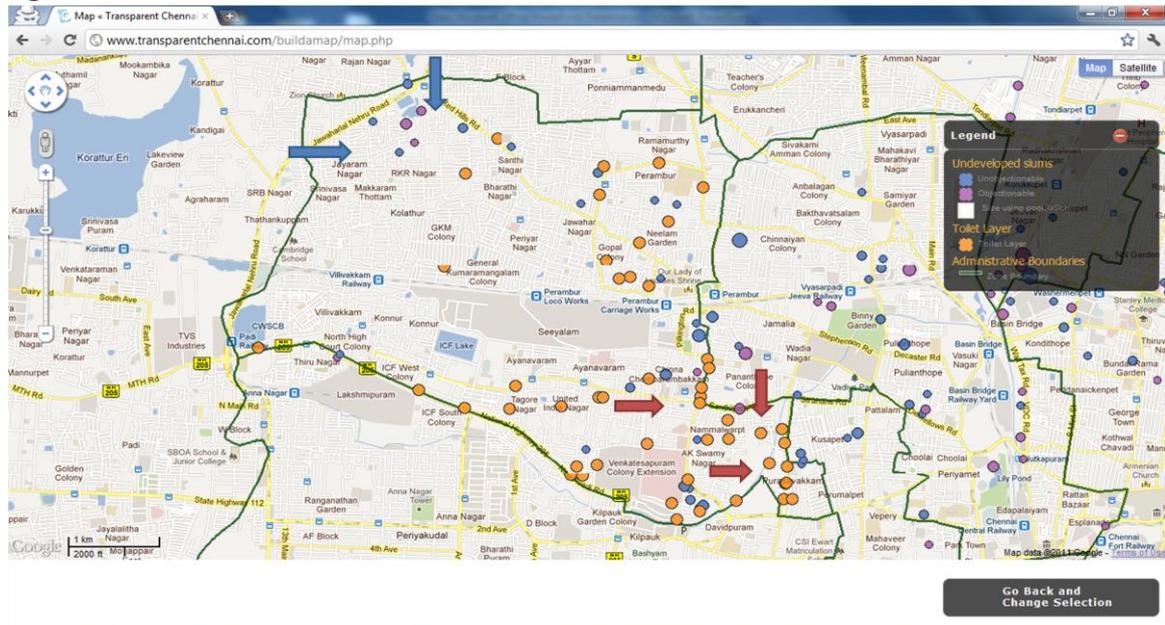
A majority, 85 percent, of the toilets we surveyed were being used by slum dwellers, and/or by workers in petty shops and construction sites. In spite of this, barring 10 toilet locations, all others prescribe user fees. While most of these toilets are intended to be free-to-use toilets, caretakers were still found charging users based on their own discretion. Even in toilets in low-income settlements, users had to pay fees for the services they avail, raising questions about the affordability and inclusiveness of these facilities. Interviews with key informants also suggest the involvement of a few local councillors in giving out public toilet contracts to “known parties.”

## **5. Toilets not in areas of apparent need**

Toilets were found in areas with very little foot-traffic, away from slums, market areas, or bus stops, and were sometimes hidden behind large walls or trees. Transparent Chennai mapped toilets in Zone 4 against a map of undeclared slums (Figure 1), slums which have had no government investment in environmental improvements and are presumably areas of greatest need for sanitation from a 2005 survey by the Tamil Nadu Slum Clearance Board (TNSCB), and found that many slum areas did not have a toilet nearby, and that there were clusters of toilets where there were no slums at all.

In Figure 1 below, each purple and blue dot corresponds to a slum, whereas each orange dot corresponds to a single public toilet. Take for instance, the northwest tip of Zone 4. One can see a cluster of slums (approximately 30,000 people), but not a single public toilet in the vicinity. Toilets also appear to be clustered in the south east corner of the zone (red arrows), but are very few and far between in the northwest parts (blue arrows) of the zone.

**Figure 1:**



▪ **No clear lines of accountability for public toilets in Chennai:**

Our interviews with government officials from Chennai Metro Water (the city water utility), TNSCB, and CoC’s zonal offices highlighted the absence of accountability for public toilets, as well as for sanitation for the poor as a whole. At the zonal level, sanitary inspectors report to the zonal Health Officer and are responsible for public health in designated wards, including monitoring toilets. Unfortunately, these inspectors, who make daily rounds of their wards and are most aware of the local sanitation needs and problems, have no authority over the zonal engineers who actually maintain, construct, and demolish toilets. At the city level, there is no department, agency, or individual charged with overseeing public toilets, nor with sanitation for the poor as a whole, and residents in undeclared slums are completely overlooked. Metro Water, a parastatal agency, responsible for the water supply and sewerage network in the city has no incentive to serve the urban poor, and often blames TNSCB for provision gaps. TNSCB, on the other hand, responsible for hygienic tenements for the poor does not address issues of sanitation in unrecognized or undeclared slums.

Clearly, the overlapping nature of responsibilities of TNSCB, CoC and Metro Water coupled with lack of clarity with respect to the provision of sanitation and public toilets within the city make the system a highly complex one. It thus becomes impossible to hold one or all accountable for poor service delivery in this context.

▪ **Low budgetary allocations for public toilets in the city:**

Budgets for toilets are also meagre. In Zone 4, we found that Rs. 19.7 lakhs had been spent on repair and maintenance for a total of 49 public toilets in 2008-2009. Assuming each public toilet facility received an equal share from this sum, it would mean that approximately Rs. 40,000 had been spent (Rs. 3,300 per month) on the running and maintenance of each of these toilet facilities. The total budget allocation in the same year for overall “Repairs and Maintenance” for Zone 4 was 3.77 crores, out of which Rs. 1.1 crores was allocated towards development of roads and pavements alone. The revised estimate for 2009-2010 in Zone 4 is even less, just Rs. 6 lakhs. Even when one looks at the overall expenditure on Public Conveniences in all 10 Zones in Chennai, a declining pattern is evident.

The actual expenditure in 2007-08 on “Repairs and Maintenance” of public conveniences was Rs 1.44 crores, approximately Rs. 13,000 per toilet, while the budget estimate for 2009-10 is just 97 lakhs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Clear cut definition of roles and responsibilities:**

The study results suggest that a single authority be made accountable for provision of public toilets in the city. Sanitation, especially for the poor in both declared and undeclared slum areas, should be a priority among the objectives of the state, and targeted programmes to increase access to sanitation should not only be initiated in Chennai, but should also be closely followed up by active citizen participation to ensure needs are being met.

- **Better data for public toilets:**

A central repository of up-to-date data on public toilets including their locations should be maintained at the Corporation and shared with all relevant agencies to ensure that there is quality data for effective planning and implementation of public sanitation infrastructure within the city.

- **More spending on public toilets:**

The government needs to spend more on public toilets, and use up-to-date data on toilets and other city features like bus stops, market areas, and slums to ensure that toilets are being built in locations of greatest need.

- **City Sanitation Plan for Chennai:**

Given the incredible need for sanitation, the situation is unconscionable. Yet, the government is not acting on existing opportunities to make a change. The Ministry of Urban Development, in an effort to promote better urban sanitation, recently allotted Rs. 13 crores to states in order to support cities in preparing City Sanitation Plans, plans in which they would assess needs and make commitments to providing access to sanitation for all. While many cities have already begun drafting their CSP's, Tamil Nadu has not taken any steps towards this goal. While the state continues to make multi-crore investments in IT parks and elevated expressways, the most basic needs of residents, especially those from poorer sections of society, continue to be ignored. Transparent Chennai recommends that the process of writing the City Sanitation Plan be initiated in Chennai in a transparent and participatory manner as a starting point towards ensuring that everyone in the city has access to basic sanitation.

#### SUMMARY STATISTICS:

- ✓ Only 714 toilets for 46 lakh population
- ✓ No clear lines of accountability for public toilets in Chennai
- ✓ Low budgetary allocations for public toilets in the city
- ✓ Poor data management and data inconsistencies

#### Zone 4 Findings:

- ✓ Zone 4 has only 49 toilets and considerable slum population
- ✓ Only 13 out of 49 toilets found to be clean and hygienic
- ✓ 6 out of 49 toilets had facilities only for men
- ✓ 50 per cent of toilets surveyed had no bathing facility for men or women
- ✓ 27 toilets had no lights within each latrine
- ✓ Approximately 80 per cent of toilets surveyed did not have 24 hours water supply
- ✓ Toilets locked at night for safety; encouraging open defecation
- ✓ 18 toilets had no caretaker/maintenance staff during visits
- ✓ 85 per cent of toilets used by informal sector workers/slum dwellers
- ✓ Barring 10 toilet locations, all others prescribe user fees
- ✓ Toilets not in areas of apparent need: Clusters of toilets in one area while no toilets in others

#### Information available on our website:

1. The GPS locations for each of the 49 public toilets in Zone 4, along with pictures and toilet profiles can be accessed through 'Toilet Layer' on the 'Build a Map' (<http://www.transparentchennai.com/buildamap/>) feature on the website.
2. The count of public toilets 'by ward' and 'by zone' is also accessible through the 'Build a Map' section.
3. Ongoing research, publications and datasets on sanitation are available on the research section of the website <http://www.transparentchennai.com/research/sanitation/>
4. Our blog, Chennai Kaleidoscope, also publishes weekly information on Transparent Chennai's ongoing work, including updates on sanitation. <http://www.transparentchennai.com/blog/>

For further information on public toilets, please write to [somya.sethuraman@ifmr.ac.in](mailto:somya.sethuraman@ifmr.ac.in) or [nithya.raman@ifmr.ac.in](mailto:nithya.raman@ifmr.ac.in). You can also call us on +91 9940503894.

#### About us:

Transparent Chennai ([www.transparentchennai.com](http://www.transparentchennai.com)) is a government accountability project housed at the Centre for Development Finance, Institute for Financial Management and Research, Chennai. Transparent Chennai creates and disseminates maps, data, and research about important civic issues, and works with citizens to create data to aid their advocacy. The project has collected and mapped both government and citizen generated data on public sanitation, solid waste management, informal settlements, road safety and pedestrian infrastructure, electoral and administrative boundaries, and much more. Its maps and research studies are widely disseminated through issue briefs, publications in newspapers and blogs, and through public meetings.