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The big squat' to take a stand on sanitation

Shalini Umachandran, TNN 11 November 2009, 06:39am IST

CHENNAI: He's the WTO chief and his work leaves him flush with happiness. Jack Sim, founder, World Toilet Organization (the other WTO, as he puts it) has spent the last 12 years working to improve toilets and sanitation around the world "and thoroughly enjoys every moment of it".

The 52-year-old former businessman was in Chennai for an awareness drive ahead of World Toilet Day on November 19. "WTO is an advocacy group. We don't actually build toilets; we partner with organisations across the world and share knowledge and experience," says Sim.

He says many people have TVs and mobile phones but no toilets. "It's about prioritising sanitation; 40% of the world has no access to proper toilets. Sanitation is about making people aware of the relationship between hygiene and health," he says.

WTO which has over 200 partners worldwide, 42 of which are in India is one of the few organisations that focusses only on sanitation and toilets instead of water. "Everyone clubs water

and sanitation, and 95% of the funds go towards water projects. But good sanitation is the first step towards clean water," he says.

Toilets weren't really top of the pot for Sim, who ran a number of businesses from the age of 25. "When I turned 40, I realised that I had 13,000 more days to live the average Singaporean lives to 80 and wanted to do something useful," he says. Sim started reading and "realised that the toilet is really neglected". So he started "the other WTO" in 2001 to disseminate serious facts with a sense of humour. The logo is a toilet seat shaped like a heart. "I thought the best way to break the toilet taboo was to use lots of puns." But the name, which everyone thinks is "really bad at first" sticks in people's minds. "That's because every mother has told her child not to talk about the toilet. It's not polite'. And here we are talking about the loo quite freely," says Sim, who is often called Toilet Man.

And it's not just about getting toilets installed. "You have to keep them clean too. So Sim has started the World Toilet College in Singapore that provides training in toilet maintenance and design. "I'm hoping we can open one in India too to train toilet cleaners like technicians."

He believes people need to be given incentives to keep toilets clean. "For instance, for a city or a mall, tell them how many tourists or customers they're losing because they have bad toilets. In a rural area or slum, get the community involved by making them paint the toilet, bright and colourful, so that they feel proud of it and keep it clean," he says. "You need to create

an emotional connect with the toilet. If you keep scolding people, it's not going to work."

This year, for World Toilet Day, WTO is planning a Big Squat. "We're getting people all over the world to squat together in public places and take a picture. It's a fun way to get the message across and make people laugh," he says. World Toilet Day, according to him, provides the legitimacy for people to talk about toilets openly. "Toilets are like sex, everyone wants to discuss it, but is waiting for someone else to break the taboo."

Toilet Man learnt his lessons from Mr Condom

When Sim started WTO in 2001, he didn't really have an idea about how to create awareness about sanitation. "I took lessons from Mechai Viravaidya (the politician-activist who popularised condoms in Thailand). He was going into brothels and talking in practical terms about using condoms," says Sim. Mechai told Sim he had to develop a sense of humour about what he was setting out to do. "He told me: people will laugh at you, you have to join in and laugh with them, and then give them the facts. It was the best lesson I ever learnt. A lesson from Mr Condom (as Mechai is affectionately known) to Toilet Man."