International Journal of Food Safety and Public Health
Vol. 12 (2), pp. 001-004, September, 2025
ISSN: 2756-3693

Full Length Research Paper

Grassroots Innovations in Low-Cost Sanitation Management

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Accepted 18th August 2025

Abstract
Grassroots sanitation innovations—locally invented, adapted, or community-governed solutions—have become a practical route to safer sanitation in resource-constrained settings. They range from community mobilization models that end open defecation to frugal toilet designs, informal-settlement service models, and community-run fecal sludge treatment. This paper reviews major categories of grassroots innovations in low-cost sanitation management and explains how they work across the sanitation "service chain" (containment, emptying/transport, treatment, and safe reuse/disposal). It situates these innovations against persistent global gaps: in 2022, 3.5 billion people still lacked safely managed sanitation, including 419 million practicing open defecation. Using illustrative evidence from community-led total sanitation (CLTS), urine-diverting/ecological sanitation, container-based sanitation (CBS), and district-level fecal sludge treatment plants (FSTPs), the paper proposes an actionable framework for designing, financing, and scaling grassroots sanitation while safeguarding inclusion, dignity, and public health.

Keywords: *grassroots innovation, low-cost sanitation, fecal sludge management, CLTS, ecosan, container-based sanitation, inclusive WASH*

1. Introduction

Low-cost sanitation is often discussed as "toilet construction," but sanitation success is determined by management: who maintains facilities, who empties pits or septic tanks, where waste goes, and whether treated outputs are safely reused or disposed. In many low-income communities—especially rural areas and dense informal settlements—formal sewer networks are absent and municipal services are limited. Under these constraints, grassroots innovations emerge as "real-world engineering": communities, local entrepreneurs, self-help groups, and frontline workers create or adapt solutions that fit space, water availability, affordability, and social norms. The stakes are high. WHO/UN system monitoring shows that in 2022 a large share of humanity still lacked safely managed sanitation, and open defecation persisted for hundreds of millions. This gap is not simply a coverage issue; it reflects inequality in who receives reliable services. Grassroots innovation is not a substitute for public investment, but it can bridge last-mile delivery, accelerate behavior change, and create viable service models—especially when governments provide enabling regulation, financing, and treatment infrastructure.

2. What "grassroots innovation" means in sanitation management

In this paper, grassroots innovations are defined as locally driven practices, technologies, or service arrangements that:

1. **Solve a real constraint** (cost, water scarcity, space, flooding, tenure insecurity).
2. **Are workable with local capacity** (materials, skills, governance).
3. **Improve service-chain performance**—not only the toilet but also emptying, transport, treatment, and safe end-use.
4. **Are socially adopted**—used consistently, accepted culturally, and maintained over time.

This definition intentionally includes "non-technology" innovations (e.g., community-led triggering, women's group management, incentive mechanisms, GPS tracking of desludging trucks) because sanitation is a socio-technical system.

3. Context: the sanitation gap that grassroots solutions respond to

3.1 Global sanitation service gaps

The WHO/UNICEF JMP reporting indicates that in 2022, 3.5 billion people lacked safely managed sanitation, including 419 million who practiced open defecation. WHO also reports that 57% of the global population (4.6 billion) used safely managed sanitation in 2022, implying substantial remaining deficits.

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3.2 Why "low-cost toilets" alone fail

Common failure modes include:

- pits filling up with no affordable safe emptying option,
- sludge dumped illegally due to lack of treatment capacity,
- toilets unused due to poor privacy/safety/accessibility,
- flooding and high water tables damaging containment,
- weak O&M for community toilets.

Thus, grassroots innovation matters most when it stabilizes the service chain, not just construction.

4. Typology of grassroots innovations in low-cost sanitation management

This section outlines five major innovation pathways that repeatedly appear in successful low-cost sanitation transformations.

4.1 Social and behavioral innovations: Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS)

CLTS is a community mobilization approach that aims to eliminate open defecation through collective behavior change rather than hardware subsidies as the primary lever. Evidence from UNICEF's regional review notes outcomes such as reduced open defecation, increased landlord investment in toilets for tenants, and empowerment of women's organizations (in adapted/urban contexts).

What makes CLTS "grassroots"?

- It uses social norms and local leadership to drive action.
- It often results in locally appropriate latrine designs using local materials.
- It can generate village-level monitoring and peer accountability.

Risks and safeguards:

If pressure becomes coercive or if "ODF" certification focuses on declarations over sustained safe management, health outcomes may be limited. High-quality implementation requires emphasis on dignity, inclusion, and post-ODF sustainability (upgrading toilets and ensuring sludge management).

4.2 Frugal design innovations: Ecological sanitation and urine-diverting dry toilets (UDDTs)

In water-scarce or groundwater-sensitive settings, low-cost designs that avoid flushing can be crucial. UDDT/ecosan approaches separate urine and feces to reduce odor and facilitate safer handling and nutrient recovery. Grassroots ecosan pilots and guidance documents highlight benefits such as water savings, groundwater protection, and potential use of treated products as soil conditioner/fertilizer—when managed safely.

Why it's a management innovation:

Ecosan succeeds only when households understand correct use, and when there is a community-supported system for collection, storage, treatment, and safe reuse/disposal. Training and user support are often as important as the toilet itself.

Practical low-cost elements often seen in grassroots builds:

- locally fabricated urine-divert pans,
- ash/sawdust dehydration routines,
- simple sealed containers for safe storage,
- community demonstration units to build trust.

4.3 Service-model innovations in dense settlements: Container-Based Sanitation (CBS)

In informal settlements where space is tight and sewers are unfeasible, CBS offers a service-based alternative: households or compounds use a toilet with removable containers; waste is collected frequently and treated off-site. A recent study on CBS in Nairobi's Mukuru reports that stakeholders perceived CBS could ensure safe fecal sludge management along the service chain, while emphasizing the need to better address the needs of vulnerable groups including persons with disabilities.

What makes CBS "grassroots":

- local micro-entrepreneurs and youth manage operations/security,
- the model fits non–owner-occupied housing realities,
- users pay small recurring fees rather than large upfront costs.

Key inclusion design requirements:

- safe access at night, lighting, privacy, menstrual hygiene needs,
- accessible cabin/seat options for older persons and persons with disabilities.

4.4 Community governance innovations: managed shared toilets and caretaker models

Where private toilets are not feasible, communities often develop governance mechanisms—rotational cleaning rosters, caretaker stipends, user committees, and "pay-per-use" or subscription systems. While shared toilets are not the ideal endpoint, well-managed shared sanitation can significantly reduce open defecation and improve safety compared with unmanaged alternatives—especially as a transitional pathway while households upgrade.

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4.5 Local treatment innovations: small fecal sludge treatment plants (FSTPs) and safe end-use

A critical grassroots shift in many districts is moving from "toilets built" to "sludge treated." For example, a recent district initiative in Karnataka reported FSTPs built at about ₹48 lakh each, converting separated waste streams into products such as compost/fertilizer, coupled with GPS tracking to prevent illegal dumping and plans to involve women's self-help groups in operation.

This example illustrates a broader pattern: low-cost sanitation management improves dramatically when local governments and communities co-create treatment capacity and accountability.

5. A practical framework to evaluate grassroots sanitation innovations

To avoid "pilot-itis" (many pilots, little scale), grassroots innovations should be assessed on five dimensions:

1. **Public health protection:** Does it reduce exposure at household and neighborhood level?
2. **Service-chain completeness:** Where does waste go, and is it treated? (containment → emptying/collection → treatment → safe end-use)
3. **Life-cycle affordability:** Are capex and recurring fees manageable for poor households without sacrificing O&M?
4. **Inclusion and safety:** Does it work for women/girls, children, older adults, and persons with disabilities?
5. **Scalability and governance:** Can it be replicated with local institutions, regulation, and financing?

Using this framework helps distinguish between "cheap construction" and "affordable, safe services."

6. Pathways for scaling: how grassroots becomes sustainable systems

6.1 Enable with policy and finance

- **Pro-poor financing:** targeted support for the poorest and vulnerable.
- **Outputs and verification:** payments linked to sustained functionality and safe management, not just construction.
- **Regulation for emptying and treatment:** licensing, routing, and monitoring to prevent illegal dumping.

6.2 Build local capacity (the hidden ingredient)

- user training (especially for ecosan/UDDT),
- local masons and entrepreneurs trained on quality construction,
- SHGs and youth groups empowered to manage toilets/FSTPs,
- municipal staff trained to plan fecal sludge management.

6.3 Measure what matters

Move beyond "number of toilets" to:

- % sludge safely treated,
- functionality and cleanliness scores,
- user satisfaction and safety (especially for women),
- inclusion audits (PWD access),
- reduction in open defecation and contamination hotspots.

7. Discussion: strengths and limitations of grassroots innovation

Strengths

- fast adaptation to local constraints,
- higher acceptance when communities co-design solutions,
- can reach informal settlements where conventional models struggle,
- can create local livelihoods (caretakers, pit emptiers, collectors, plant operators).

Limitations

- cannot replace the need for public infrastructure (especially treatment capacity),
- quality varies without standards and training,
- risks of stigma and unsafe labor unless occupational safety is enforced,
- long-term sustainability needs reliable financing and governance.

The best outcomes occur when grassroots initiatives are linked to formal sanitation planning, especially fecal sludge treatment and monitoring.

8. Conclusion

Grassroots innovations are reshaping low-cost sanitation management by shifting attention from toilet construction to service delivery, inclusion, and local accountability. In a world where billions still lack safely managed sanitation and open defecation persists for hundreds of millions, these innovations offer practical, scalable building blocks—particularly when supported by enabling policy, financing, and treatment infrastructure. The next phase of sanitation progress requires integrating community-driven behavior change (e.g., CLTS), frugal technology choices (e.g., UDDTs/ecosan where appropriate), service-model innovations (e.g., CBS in dense settlements), and district-level sludge treatment

(e.g., FSTPs) into coherent, equity-first sanitation systems.

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