



GOROKA'S LOVELY LOOS

Kalolaine Fainu

Rebecca Sari stands outside her VIP toilet decorated with old number plates



A couple from Sami village stand in front of their newly built toilet

I've travelled southeast Asia on a shoestring, trekked parts of South Africa and island-hopped my way around the South Pacific. I've explored Vietnam by motorbike, spent bone-crunching hours on buses and trains in Thailand, nearly went down with the ship in Tonga, and driven a rental car that should have been in the junkyard across the Namibian desert.

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At times I've been forced to hold my nose and use squat toilets covered with poop and pee. In some villages, the only toilet available was an open pit with no ventilation or sawdust; wet and smelly and covered in flies. Some pits were just a plank of wood and a square hole where I had to be extremely careful about how I placed my weight!

Some had plastic toilet seats or bucket-like seats, and all of them required strong legs to kangaroo squat to avoid touching anything unquestionably contaminated. When I was assigned to document the progress of the PNG National WaSH (Water,

Sanitation and Hygiene) Policy in Goroka as part of a series of videos our PNG team was producing on the Klinpela Kommuniti Projek, I was both excited and a little apprehensive. My brief included photographing, inside and out, the toilets of the village communities involved in the program. Goroka had been a bucket-list destination of mine for a while, but I had to admit I wasn't crazy about the idea of getting up close with the places humanity uses to excrete its waste. Visions of previous travel experiences invaded my mind, tempering my adventurous zeal. The thought that people may also feel somewhat embarrassed showing me their toilets also crossed my mind, adding to my sense of unease. Disembarking at Goroka is a breath of fresh air, literally. Cool oxygen fills my lungs and as we exit the airport gates, I discover that the airport sits inside the town centre. I hadn't expected that. The fresh produce market outlined by a vast field of colourful umbrellas beckons to me, and I itch to jump out of the car, but I am here for work and already a day late, so we head straight to the office to meet the ground team. Valiantly named 'Touching the Untouchables', this team are



Villagers sometimes use soft leaves like these in the absence of toilet paper



Ihato Bery from Sukapass village is delighted to have fresh drinking water from the water pipe newly installed in her yard



A Sukapass villager carries water to her home from the community's piped water source

UNICEF's implementing partner in Goroka. The objective of the European Union-funded 'klinpela kommuniti' project is to improve access to clean and safe water and hence improve the quality of life for women, men and children. The villages we visit are on the outskirts of Goroka and from the moment I step foot in them to the moment I leave I am surrounded by wide smiles, lots of laughter and a bursting enthusiasm to show me how much has been achieved so far. Villagers vie among themselves to show me their individual and communal toilets and I very soon realise my earlier trepidation was completely unfounded. These communities have worked together to achieve ODF (open defecation

free) certification by installing VIP toilets (ventilation improved pits) with tippy taps (locally-made devices for washing hands outdoors) or other water sources to wash hands easily and effectively, plus a range of other hygienic practices. They are proud, and rightly so. Inspecting each VIP toilet becomes a real delight. Each family has designed their own toilet house themselves, often adding personal touches to adorn and embellish their outhouses. There are decorative bamboo walls, flowerpots and even a vintage-styled outhouse with old number plates on the walls! I am super impressed by these colourful, welcoming, clean outhouses and... guess what? There are no smells!

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The women in the green shirts were responsible for digging 33 pit toilets in their village



Kay Kay Ezave was awarded for building the best VIP toilet in her village

The crippling effects of poor sanitation and hygiene are well documented. They impact on nutrition and health as well as economic growth and development and, in the process, eats away at a person's sense of dignity and self-worth, contributing to an ever-present cycle of deprivation. I very quickly come to understand why every person I meet in the village is so eager for me to check out their lovely loo! I discover it is the women who are mainly responsible for pushing to improve hygiene and sanitation practices. In Kabiufa village I'm told a story about eight elderly women who dug out the pits for 33 toilets in their community. In Komegu, the story is similar, where women took charge of digging out the pits for the toilets and the children were put in charge of digging the holes for rubbish

A continuous airflow through the ventilation pipe removes odours, helps waste break down through its drying action and effectively controls flies. Brilliant! These toilets in Goroka are both clean and charming, and, when nature inevitably calls, I have zero hesitation in asking to use one. In fact, I can safely say they are the cleanest and most impressive pit toilets I've ever seen! So much for my first-world preconceptions.

“Each family has designed their own toilet house themselves, often adding personal touches such as decorative bamboo walls and flowerpots”



Rose Tata gets her fingernails cleaned and trimmed by her grand-daughter

pits and making the tippy taps. Both these communities receive their ODF certificate during my visit, with one woman from Komegu speaking passionately at the ceremony about the direct impact these changes have made on the people living in the village. “Before the program the village was filled with rubbish,” Rose Ken tells us. “Kids and mothers were sick with diarrhoea, but now everything is much cleaner and people are healthier.” The winner of the ‘best VIP toilet’ in Kabiufa village is Kay Kay Ezave for her innovation in creating separate male and female toilets by using a wall to divide her family's double pit toilet. Kay Kay also placed an



Fresh garden flowers adorn this Kabiufa village toilet

old sink on the ground to collect and carefully drain away grey water from her hand-washing station and stop it pooling into a muddy mess. The 10 steps to achieve ‘open defecation free’ status for communities include: a VIP toilet; rubbish hole with lid; beautification; dish rack or table; animal fencing; nutritional gardens; clean safe drinking water; ventilated homes; family planning; and immunisation. One of my favourite parts of this assignment is to inspect the beautification projects in each village. Tidy pathways are lined with neatly trimmed trees and bushes while flower beds bloom with the fragrant and brightly coloured dahlias for which Goroka is famous. Complementing these decorative plants are backyards full of nutritional garden produce, including the biggest bunches of broccoli I've ever seen and all varieties of leafy greens – aibika, aupa and local lettuces galore. Fruit trees are laden with tropical fruit and I'm offered succulent oranges or tart limes plucked straight off the branch to eat on the spot or take home. These are happy villages,



Iva Iso shows her sons how to use a tippy tap to wash their hands

with friendly, funny people unashamed to put their warm outgoing characters on display and are proud to work hard to better the lives of their community. The engaging and unpretentious people of Goroka remind me of the simple things in life that we should be grateful for, particularly having an adequate supply of clean, safe water to drink and wash in. How privileged most of us are to have a clean flushing toilet that we take as a given, no effort involved. This experience demonstrates the good work of PNG UNICEF and what can be achieved through community

collaboration. Kudos to the women – particularly the grandmothers – who stepped forward to drive this project, and also the men and children who played their part. Sometimes leadership is as simple as picking up a shovel and starting to dig.▲

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