

The sun has only just begun the second part of its daily trajectory through the skies above the little Senegalese village of N'Goundiane, about 100 km east of the capital, Dakar.

In the shade of the 'talking tree' a man of about 50 recounts a story. One day some years ago, his 10 year-old-son suddenly found himself at the bottom of a cesspool because the flooring above it had given way beneath the child's weight. Built in a thoroughly home-made way, and not meeting any kind of safety standards, Mr NDiouga Faye's latrine was the first one ever built in N'Goundiane.

This episode, from which the child emerged unscathed, resulted in the villagers becoming even more skeptical about the advantages of fitting their homes with such equipment. NDiouga didn't hesitate for a moment, however, before building another latrine, and two or three other block chiefs followed his lead.

These three or four latrines initially had no impact on the habits of the villagers, who continued to withdraw some distance from the village every time nature called. But even this traditional system was not without drama, particularly for the adults who, in full view of their children, regularly had to retreat to 'hidden places'. In an environment where custom endows adults with a certain mystique entitling them to the respect of youth, it is quite embarrassing to be observed going off to relieve one's biological needs. What's more, the lack of vegetation around the village due to drought and deforestation forced the adults to withdraw even further, so as not to be seen undressing.

As for the children, they relieved themselves whenever and wherever the need struck them. Consequently the danger from excrement was constant. The result was epidemics and deadly cases of diarrhea, particularly among children.

DIARRHEA: A KILLER

The International Children's Centre is located at Khombole, the administrative centre of the communal area, 46 km from N'Goundiane. The Centre is responsible for the supervision of sanitation in the area and its statistics show that disease, with diarrhea at the head of the list, kills more than half of each generation of children before the age of five.

Nowadays diarrhea still kills in N'Goundiane, but excrement is not the sole cause. Latrines have arrived in the village, and in several concessions, the 'hidden places' away from the houses are no more than a bad memory. Since October 1984, 80 latrines have been put into service in N'Goundiane, built with funding from IDRC.

The project began in 1983 and the initial program called for the construction of latrines, 10 pits for burning refuse, and the rebuilding of the village's five traditional wells.

When one takes stock of the work, it is easy to see that not everything has

THE LATRINE COMES TO N'GOUNDIANE

By IBRAHIMA BAKHOUM

been done, even if the main goals seem to have been achieved. Only five of the 10 pits planned for the burning of refuse have been built, and nothing has been done about restoring the wells.

RISING COSTS

The Director of the National School of Sanitary Engineering at Khombole, who is responsible for executing the project, explains that this situation results from the prices of building materials becoming inflated. The cost of iron, cement and canvas went up between the time the project was planned and

"The lack of vegetation around the village due to drought and deforestation forced the adults to withdraw even further, so as not to be seen undressing."

the implementation phase, which meant that the budget could not cover the all the planned purchases. However, the equipment that was installed does not seem to justify the amount budgeted, the cost per unit being very high compared to what it has been possible to do in other village projects. Still, opting for latrines to the detriment of the wells turned out to be the best choice since the village now has a bore-hole which has made people forget about traditional water sources.

As for the burning pits, the villagers seem to have only a theoretical understanding of their use. Designed to receive light domestic refuse, the pits are equipped with a grill halfway down that collects the ashes for later use as fertilizer in the fields. All those asked about this recited their lesson perfectly, but the pits remain unused and the grill has even disappeared from one of them.

Such a lack of interest can be explained by several hypotheses. The vil-

lagers claim they were never told they could use them. However, Abdoulaye N'Doye, the workman who built them, continues to say that the green light for their use was well and truly given.

A second hypothesis is based on the fact that household refuse has never really been a problem in the village. So far there is no industrial waste produced in this environment. It is mainly animal excrement from stables and pens which has to be disposed of and it is generally sent out to the fields as manure.

Lastly, everything leads one to suppose that what has often happened in other villages has also occurred in N'Goundiane: the local population wasn't consulted as to what kind of equipment they felt best suited their needs. No one here remembers ever having attended an information meeting. The team of experts only visited the village once to announce that latrines would be built there.

SETTING A TREND

It is obvious, however, that the inhabitants of N'Goundiane are thoroughly satisfied with the project. When the author went there to gather information for this article, all those who hastened to meet him in the village square couldn't find adequate words to express their feelings of satisfaction and gratitude.

Those who at first held back because they doubted the outcome of the project are now pressing the head of the village to give them priority on a new list of participants, in anticipation of a possible second operation of the same kind. With 80 latrines for a population of 3000, pressure on the facilities is still very heavy.

But a second phase might not serve any purpose because the project has already started a trend — some of the villages are now thinking of building their own sanitary equipment. And nowadays the only reason that anyone in N'Goundiane remembers the fate that befell NDiouga Faye's son is to show the importance of properly built latrines. □

Ibrahima Bakhoum is a journalist with the Senegalese Press Agency (APS).