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RAWCS Project No: 21-2014-15



Small build, big impact

Around 14 years ago, while in Mumbai on a business trip, some friends took me to visit a place called Dharavi. This is one of the biggest slums in the world, with almost a million people living in an area of around 2.5 square kilometres.

While we were in Dharavi, they took me to a school where I was shocked to learn that all the teenage girls had dropped out because the school had no toilets.

A few months later another friend took me to a small village a few hours by road from Pune. The village had around 300 residents and one primary school. You can see the students in front of the school here. The young woman on the left was the schoolteacher.

The school had no toilet.

The teacher told me that she lived in another village around two hours away by bus. She would travel to work every morning, work all day and then take the bus two hours home again. The first thing she would do when she arrived home was to drink a glass of water because she was too afraid to drink water while at school in case she needed to go to the toilet.

She also told me that she could not go to school when she had her period. This meant that the children could not go to school at that time either. The mothers of the children had to stay home from work to look after the children thereby reducing the family incomes.

And of course, everyone in the community knew when this young woman had her period.

My friend and I decided to build one toilet and a wash basin for the school to see if this would help the situation.

A few months later the teacher informed us that she could now drink water at school, she was going to work every day, the children were at school every day, the mothers were at work every day, family incomes were back up and of course nobody knew when she had her period. She had her dignity back and the entire community was transformed all because of a single toilet! Imagine this on a bigger scale!

Well, happily we do not need to just imagine it anymore. Twelve years ago, I joined the Rotary Club of Box Hill Central in Melbourne and the club quickly started on what has now become a series of 23 projects – 15 in India, 5 in Ethiopia and 3 in Nepal. Nine of these projects have been Global Grants, with the most recent one being submitted to the Rotary Foundation in February 2026.



These projects have been supported by well over 50 Rotary Clubs and 11 Districts in seven countries. We have also received support from countless hundreds of individuals, schools and organisations, many of whom have chosen to support this work through RAWCS. Indeed, our latest Global Grant would never have got off the ground in the first place if not for RAWCS which was the source for almost the entire amount of our own club's contribution to the project.

It is most important to note that these projects are not just about toilets. They are about a holistic approach to WASH (Water, Sanitation & Hygiene) where the children learn about proper use of toilets, soap and water as well as menstrual hygiene management through a comprehensive WASH education program.

This is the core of the work in these global grants and all our smaller projects too. Only through the education program can we develop projects which are sustainable after Rotary moves on to its next project.