SAFE launched to rid SA schools of pit toilets

With nearly 4,000 schools with pit latrines, President Cyril Ramaphosa says the launch of the Sanitation Appropriate for Education (SAFE) initiative is an answer to an emergency.

Pit latrines. Image by SuSanA Secretariat, Wikimedia Commons

"The SAFE initiative reaches beyond the bricks and mortar of water and sanitation. SAFE will spare generations of young South Africans the indignity, discomfort and danger of using pit latrines and other unsafe facilities in our schools," said Ramaphosa.

The president, together with Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, kicked-off their Tuesday morning, with the launch of the SAFE initiative, rallying leaders of business to pledge their support towards the eradication of pit latrines in schools.

Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo top the provinces with the highest number of pit latrines or inadequate sanitation facilities. Reflecting on the tragic deaths of Michael Komape and Lumka Mkhethwa, who died in 2014 and 2018 respectively, while using pit toilets, the president said more needs to be done.

"The utterly tragic and devastating deaths of children so young and so innocent remind us of the human consequences of service delivery delayed.

"They remind us that we must focus all our attention not on what we have achieved, but on what we haven't," said

Ramaphosa.

Multi-stakeholder participation

Recognising that government alone cannot eradicate pit latrines, he called on stakeholders from the private sector to join hands with government.

"With today's launch, we are calling on all South Africans, corporates, NGOs and international partners to be part of this ambitious, but necessary, effort to give effect to the fundamental human rights of our learners," said Ramaphosa.

Basic Education Deputy Minister Enver Surty led the ceremony of pledges, where more than R100m was raised towards the eradication of pit latrines by businesses such as Avbob, Lonmin and Sasol.

While SAFE is a Basic Education-led initiative, it partners with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), United Nations Children's Fund and Nelson Mandela Foundation to roll-out access to safe sanitation facilities across schools. With NECT as an implementing arm of the Education Collaboration Framework (ECF), its chairman Sizwe Nxasana said transparency and efficiency will be the order of the day with the SAFE initiative.

"We have created a steering committee which will have representatives from UNICEF, the private sector and government to ensure transparency and efficiency in how the SAFE initiative will be managed.

"At the end of the day, not only are we improving education outcomes but also we are ensuring dignity," said Nxasana.

Backing Nxasana, Nelson Mandela Foundation CEO Sello Hatang said it was up to current leaders to take decisions that will benefit future leaders.

"Young children are the silent and mostly invincible constituency, and it is our responsibility to undertake actions on their behalf which are to their benefit and that starts with ensuring their dignity," said Hatang.

Lend a hand

In calling for collaborative solutions towards the eradication of pit toilets, Ramaphosa gave potential supporters three channels to contribute:

- Companies can support the construction of models of new technology toilets as a core component of the plan for each school.
- Companies can adopt a group of schools as model schools for joint sanitation-water-energy off-grid solutions.
- Companies can be part of building a South African base for the industrialisation of these new technologies for local and global markets.

"In whatever way we each choose to assist, there is an urgent need to collectively develop infrastructure that will bring dignity to those who lack safe and adequate sanitation and thereby, improve public health.

"We seek sustainable and affordable solutions that have community support. We seek partners that will not rest until every school and every learner has decent, safe and appropriate sanitation," said Ramaphosa.