This thematic discussion focuses on how to move towards more sustainable urban sanitation. The discussions will be organised around two areas: 1) addressing the entire sanitation chain and the need to embrace systemic change; and 2) the role (or lack of) of local governments and its leaders to drive the required change.

**Week 1, topic 1:**

**Holistic comprehensive systemic change or piecemeal solutions?**

The guiding questions for this week’s topic are:

1. What are your views on using the systemic change approach for addressing the (urban) sanitation challenges?
2. Is it justifiable to continue focusing on onsite containment of human faeces and thereby ignoring all the other links of the sanitation chain?
3. How can we balance the need for systemic long-time change with addressing some of the immediate urgent needs?

**Background**

In a world where the urbanisation rate is increasing, many more organisations are redirecting their attention and energy towards improving sanitation and hygiene conditions in urban areas. This may not be a bad idea considering the huge problems at hand. Consider for example that right now some 700 million urban dwellers worldwide still lack access to improved sanitation.

These numbers hide the fact that the current JMP definition for improved sanitation (a facility which hygienically separates human excreta from human contact) does not address the subsequent management of faecal waste. This means that the health risks and environmental burden associated with unsafely managed faecal matter are still there.

**The problem is complex and there are no simple solutions**

Urban sanitation is a complex challenge. Factors contributing to these challenges are numerous and varied. For example, weak government leadership, lack of institutional clarity, limited capacities of public officials and other sector actors, limited public financing with increased inequality as a result, weak policy and regulatory framework and lack of enforcement of norms and standards, inadequate containment by onsite systems resulting in toilets discharging in drains or open water bodies, lack of adequately services to safely remove, transport, treat and dispose or reuse human waste resulting in indiscriminate dumping of human waste, etc.

Is it therefore enough to focus only on one or two elements of this complex system or do we need to come up with solutions for all the non-functioning elements in the chain?

**Systemic change versus piece meal solutions**

In a recent blog ‘But what is it that you actually do?’ IRC’s CEO Patrick Moriarty explains what has to change to ensure that everyone, everywhere will be able to enjoy access to water, sanitation and hygiene services that last forever. The blog includes a slide deck that provides a simple visualisation of what is required to achieve universal and sustained services by focusing

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1 This figure of 700 million is estimated on the basis of the information provided in the latest JMP Progress on sanitation and drinking water – 2015 Update and MDG assessment.
on changing the entire system. Patrick’s blog can be accessed at
http://www.ircwash.org/blog/but-what-is-it-that-you-actually-do

What are we talking about? **Systemic change** is change that encompasses all parts of a system, taking into account the interrelationships and interdependencies among those parts whereas **piecemeal change** focuses on one or several parts of a system and thereby addresses only pieces of the urban sanitation problem.

Systemic change means that we need to 1) improve (sanitation) conditions in an entire geographic or administrative area (e.g. municipality) and not in one or two small pockets (e.g. slums), 2) assess and address all the relevant (weak) parts by considering all parts of a system, 3) involve and work with all the stakeholders, and 4) be consciously systematic in what we do. The following figure provides a simple framework which includes most if not all the elements of this system thinking.

![System thinking and all the parts that may need to be addressed](image)

Figure: System thinking and all the parts that may need to be addressed

The earlier mentioned slide deck shows that it may take up to ten years to work painstakingly through the different phases to achieve systemic change. Do we have that much time? A more detailed overview of the different phases is provided on page 24 of the following paper
http://www.ircwash.org/resources/towards-systemic-change-urban-sanitation