Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools

“Achieving truly sustainable development means creating a world that is fit for children, and that means a world with safe drinking water and clean sanitation and hygienic facilities in schools. That is why UNICEF is today calling on national leaders to ensure that in the course of this decade every primary school in the world be equipped with separate facilities for boys and girls – and that every school, without exception, have a source of clean and safe drinking water.”

Carol Bellamy, Executive Director UNICEF, World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), Johannesburg, 30 August 2002

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ISSUE

More than two billion people do not have access to sanitation facilities and are unable to perform basic hygiene practices such as washing their hands with soap and water. Millions of school-age children are affected by common infections such as helminths (worms), flukes and parasites. Far too many schools have broken, dirty and unsafe water and sanitation facilities. Many schools lack facilities altogether. All of these factors have a negative impact on the health and nutrition of school-age children, their learning capacities, and school participation and attendance. Girls are particularly hard hit.

ACTION

The need to invest in water, sanitation and hygiene services in and around schools is reflected in several internationally agreed goals and instruments, including the Education for All Dakar Framework for Action, Vision 21, and the Millennium Development Goals.

Currently, UNICEF promotes water, sanitation and hygiene education at schools in about 50 countries, including the construction of separate facilities for girls. In Pakistan 1,400 schools have been provided with water and sanitation. In Bangladesh, UNICEF supports the government and NGOs in providing water, sanitation and hygiene in more than 4,000 schools, while in India over ten thousand schools are being reached with an integrated water, sanitation and hygiene education package focusing on the needs of girls. National school sanitation policies have been strengthened in Malawi, Mozambique, Nicaragua, Uganda and Nepal. In the Gambia, Burkina Faso and Haiti, UNICEF efforts have led to the mainstreaming of inter-sectoral approaches to girls’ education, involving the education, community development, water, health and agricultural sectors. Life skills-based hygiene education is included in programmes in Vietnam, Colombia, Burkina Faso, Nepal and Senegal.

In addition, UNICEF and the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre started a school sanitation and hygiene education (SSHE) initiative in 2000 in six countries (Burkina Faso, Zambia, Vietnam, Nepal, Colombia and Nicaragua), which has resulted in a wealth of advocacy tools, case studies, and training materials. (http://www.irc.nl/sshe/).

THE WAY FORWARD

The increased interest in water, sanitation and hygiene in schools programmes is a positive development, and the lessons learned from the different initiatives and programmes provide a valid basis to build upon. However, the limited scale of many projects as well as the fragmentation in planning and implementation has led to a concern that the MDG and WSSD goals may not be reached, unless steps are taken to accelerate progress on water, sanitation and hygiene in schools. The following steps are suggested:

1. Invest in Inter-Sectoral Actions for Safe, Secure and Empowering Environments

Too often programmes are initiated by specialists from outside the education sector and are “added on” to regular education programmes. By linking water, sanitation, hygiene and health specialists with the education sector, pressure can be put on schools and education systems to design and build child-friendly water, sanitation and hand washing facilities and educate children about hygiene.

2. Empower children through life skills-based hygiene education

Reducing the incidence of diseases related to unsafe water and poor sanitation requires behavioural change leading to proper hygiene as well as the correct use of the facilities. A lifeskills-based approach to hygiene education helps focus on the development of knowledge, attitudes, values and skills children need to make the most critical and appropriate hygiene/health related decisions. Gender equity is integral to this approach.

3. Focus Intensive Interventions in Selected Countries

While country programmes continue to integrate water, sanitation and hygiene into their girls’ education programmes, there is a need to concentrate additional resources and intervention measures in selected countries to achieve robust and sustainable outcomes. Criteria include:

• countries with low coverage in water and sanitation, or high numbers of unserved people;
• high-risk countries where water and sanitation related diseases have a heavy impact on the health and nutritional status of children, including countries facing emergencies;
• leadership or example countries with a high level of political will and potential;
• countries which are part of the “25 by 2005” acceleration campaign.

4. Adopt a proactive approach

This requires accelerating gender-
focused interventions through:

- advocating with partners and national counterparts to give priority to safe, secure and healthy schools and include this in sector plans (SWAPs, PRSPs, SIPs, etc.);
- mobilising communities and institutions to work on acceleration measures;
- safeguarding the quality of the interventions — are facilities child-friendly, gender-responsive, sustainable?
- planning for the resources required — for facilities, staffing, recurrent costs, etc.

5. Create Partnerships to Advocate for a Joint Vision

Visioning is about taking a bold stand and aiming for a clear and shared vision at national and international level, with ambitious targets. We need to answer questions such as:

- Where are we now, and where do we want to be in the next five, ten and fifteen years?
- What are the constraints to ensure access to safe drinking water and separate latrines for girls and boys in schools? Are those most at risk of opportunistic infections, being empowered and getting the skills to avoid the risks and improve their lifestyles? Are gender issues addressed?
- What are the conditions in schools? What are the main features of water, sanitation and hygiene in school programmes? Who is doing what, with which means?

6. Pay Specific Attention to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene for Schools in Emergency Situations

Water, sanitation and hygiene in schools are critical as part of an emergency response to the immediate needs for drinking water and prevention of water and sanitation related diseases. It can also help to establish children’s routines of critical behaviours and add to or even create a sense of security if private unexposed facilities are available.

A CALL FOR ACTION

In line with the six key principles of acceleration outlined above, UNICEF launched a water, sanitation and hygiene education initiative at Johannesburg. The overall goal of this initiative is to contribute to improved health and well-being of an estimated thirty million people in twenty-five of the least developed countries. The project will focus on the health and well-being of children.

The project is comprised of three inter-related and mutually supportive components in rural communities:

1. Water and sanitation facilities, and hygiene education for primary schools
2. Community outreach with a focus on accelerating rural water and sanitation coverage rates
3. Creating an enabling environment through policy development and capacity building.

The proposed countries are those where girls’ enrolment rates in primary schools are the poorest and water supply and sanitation coverage rates are low: Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Benin, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Chad, D.R.Congo, Ethiopia, Haiti, Lao PDR, Liberia, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nepal, Rwanda, Tanzania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Uganda, Yemen, Zambia.

Providing separate latrine facilities is an important part of a child-friendly approach.

In Brief...

EFA Week on Girls’ Education

Girls’ education was the theme for the third Education For All (EFA) and Global Campaign for Education (GCE) Action Week, held from 6 to 13 April. The main event of the campaign which took place on 9 April was a synchronised lesson on the need to give girls a fair chance to learn. Attended by a spectacular 1.8 million people in over 90 countries, “The World’s Biggest Lesson” sent a resounding global message to world leaders to open the doors of learning to the millions of girls out of school.

The millions participating included children from Albania, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Denmark, Ethiopia, Germany, Kenya, Liberia, Nicaragua, Peru, Sudan, Zimbabwe, and many more.

UNICEF and the US Fund for UNICEF organised the lesson at the UN in New York. For UNICEF, the day was also part of the wider girls’ education acceleration campaign in 25 priority countries “25 by 2005”. Mrs. Nane Annan hosted the event. She appealed to the 350 New York City school children to stay involved with the issues of children’s rights and girls’ education.

Angelique Kidjo, Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF lead the lesson. Kofi Annan welcomed the children. He stated, “Let this be not only the world’s biggest ever lesson, but a lesson that the world will never forget”. Carol Bellamy led the group in a pledge of Go Girls! Education for every child.

More information, highlights and country reports on the events for 2003 EFA/Action Week at:

www.campaignforeducation.org,
www.globalmarch.org,
www.netaid.org, and
www.unesco.org/education/efaweek