



Malawi's school sanitation and hygiene promotion project

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How do children feel about the condition of their school's latrine? Badly enough to keep them away from school, sometimes. This article describes the process of consulting children when drawing up a strategy for improving school sanitation and promoting hygiene in the wider community.

The purpose of the school sanitation and hygiene promotion project (SSHP) is to develop and adopt national standards for sanitation facilities and hygiene promotion in primary schools. Beyond this the project aims to promote the development of such integrated programmes through links with surrounding communities.

The project will support the following outputs.

- Strengthened national and district capacity to develop and implement guidelines.
- The development of a range of options for sanitation facilities (latrines, urinals and hand-washing tanks) suited to various geological and socio-economic conditions.
- The development of a life-skills based health and hygiene education system, including gender-sensitive school hygiene promotion systems and materials.
- The establishment of 100 health-promoting schools with sanitation facilities.
- Sanitation and hygiene promotion extended to the families of school children.

A key partnership developed by schools has been with district officials through the establishment of project management teams (PMTs) in Kasungu and Nkhata Bay districts. A PMT is a multi-sectoral body that is co-ordinating project planning, design and implementation, and is a key stakeholder in overseeing that the project meets intended outputs. The district teams have developed operational plans, and are mobilizing resources for SSHP

implementation. Moreover, elected officials of a district assembly are prepared to play a key role in advocating sanitation and hygiene promotion in schools, and extending this to surrounding communities. Their involvement can be expanded even further through attendance of training programmes and by facilitating community orientation sessions. Elected and public officers can act as important agents of change in raising the status of sanitation and hygiene in relation to water supply, as well as informing people of their right to obtain basic services.

Attainment of rights

The incorporation of a human rights approach is relatively new to the water and environmental sanitation sector in Malawi, as it has traditionally been technically focused and supply driven. However, through on-going national, district and school-level consultations with user groups, there are clear moves from a supply- to a demand-responsive approach for the provision of facilities. One key element to achieving this is to understand existing practices, knowledge and attitudes and to build in

The poor status of sanitation and hygiene conditions affects children's education

interventions to support what people are already doing. Through the SSHP, schools and communities will be offered a range of sanitation options to choose from which are appropriate to their geographical, economic (low-cost), social and gender situations.

The right to sanitation

Accurate information on school sanitation facilities is not available in Malawi. However, national Demographic and Health Survey (DHS 2000) figures indicate that approximately 10 per cent of households have access to improved facilities such as flush toilets or improved pit latrines with a sanitation platform. This low coverage rate was supported by field observations in which schools visited during the sanitation review had a latrine to student

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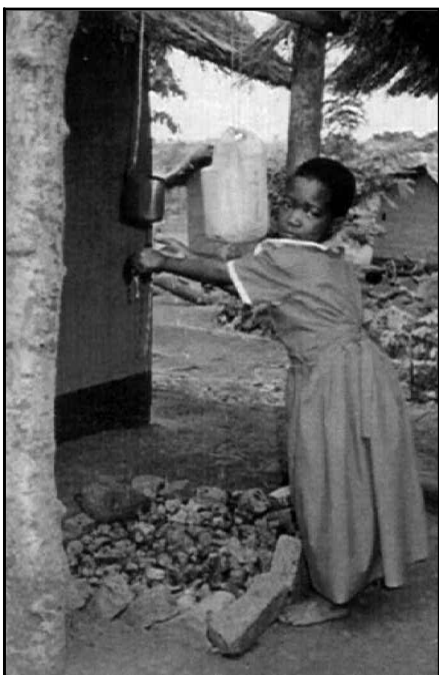
ratio of only 1 to over 100. In many cases, the facilities were poorly constructed, unsafe, vandalized and in a poor sanitary condition. Naturally children, particularly young and disabled children, do not use these facilities and therefore revert to open defecation.

Poor conditions of sanitation and hygiene affect a child's ability to access education – education which is theirs by right. Primary school students suffer frequent absenteeism due to water-borne and sanitation-related illnesses such as diarrhoea and cholera. Without adequate and adjacent facilities in schools, girls travel to neighbouring households to use the sanitation facilities, as well as up to a kilometre, two or three times a day, to fetch water.

Children have not always been consulted in past school-based interventions. Project consultation and technical designs have traditionally been the responsibility of school officials, planners

and government personnel. However, approaches like child-to-child and student focus groups are broadening the participation of children in project planning and development. Through the national sanitation review, children were questioned on what they liked and disliked about their facilities. Children spoke candidly about the changes needed to improve the safety, security, cleanliness and privacy of their sanitation facilities. These recommendations will be used by engineers and architects to make modifications in the technical designs.

To ensure that interventions remained grounded in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (the guiding international convention under which UNICEF works) as well as following a demand-responsive and results-oriented approach, requires extensive consultation with stakeholders on their needs and how they may be achieved. In order for this to occur a culture of engaging children in planning must be developed and promoted amongst those with responsibilities. Moreover, strategies developed with children, especially in planning and design stages (and later the evaluation of these strategies) will be child-focused and will provide important steps in understanding and meeting the needs of the stakeholders.



Children spoke out about the changes they needed for their sanitation facilities at school

Sanitation review

In June 2001, UNICEF-Lilongwe facilitated a sanitation technology review. The purpose was to review, evaluate and catalogue sanitation options to be tested in the strategic SSHP supported by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID). The eventual output will be a catalogue of sanitation options including visual aids such as drawings and models which can be used easily by extension workers and selected by user-groups including students. Communities and schools will select sanitation options to be implemented and tested under SSHP.

Initial meetings were held with key ministries and NGOs representing the three regions in Malawi to develop: criteria for evaluating sanitation options, methods for data collection, the membership of multi-sectoral review teams and sites to be visited. Over 50 facilities were surveyed and focus groups were held with schools, households and community water and health committees. The information was collated into a report and the presentation of findings by review teams was held in a one-day meeting in Lilongwe. A sanitation specialist, Mr Bjorn Brandberg of SBI Consulting, was engaged to make design modifications based on the outcome of the chil-



Better technical know-how among those who supervise latrine construction will mean better workmanship

dren's and households' focus groups. In addition, Mr Brandberg will develop a training programme for school- and community-based facilitators on the construction of their selected latrine design, the purpose being that communities and schools monitor the latrine construction and ensure that facilities are meeting their needs and expectations.

A UNICEF consultant, Mr Vic Kasinja, has been engaged to design child-friendly depictions of the sanitation facilities using characters from the Sara Communication Initiative. He has already designed a comic book for standards 5 to 8 on the importance of school latrines using the feedback and information gained from the sanitation review.

Outcomes

While the information presented by the sanitation review teams is of varying quality, it is clear that the process was innovative in attempting to evaluate sanitation facilities. The review presents a good starting point for the evaluation of technical options suitable

Labour for building latrines is especially a constraint for female-headed households

for schools. Children spoke very candidly about their sanitation facilities and gave useful insights for improvements. From the findings, children appear to be effective and keen advocates for improved sanitation both in their schools and communities.

Beyond technology options, the review also gave indications that workmanship and cleanliness are two equal and important factors for students when it comes to sanitation facilities in school. Children lose confidence in facilities when they are poorly constructed and often prefer to use the bush or open areas rather than the facility. For example, if children feel at risk that the latrine will collapse, or feel that it is disgusting, they will not use the latrine and will opt to go to the bush. One way the project will address this is through improving the workmanship of sanitary facilities, a better choice of materials and better maintenance. The most effective means of ensuring that the facilities

are in good working order is to combine latrine construction with school-organized monitoring and supervision activities, as well as a school hygiene programme. Ideas on designing these programmes will be explored during the project orientations with teachers, students and school committees.

Some lessons learned and constraints identified in relation to sanitation promotion include:

- It was found that at a household level, labour costs are relatively high in relation to materials costs for latrine construction. Labour is a particular constraint for female-headed households. Women have to pay for labourers to build their latrines. Moreover, for many households, the construction of a suitable superstructure is a constraint.
- Many improved pits are rendered unused because the household feels

Girls often have to clean latrines three times a day, as well as fetching water to do so

that they cannot afford to construct a new superstructure. Greater sensitization is needed to get households to close off old, unsafe and unsanitary pits in favour of using old superstructures on new and improved pit latrines.

- For schools, a major constraint is that of being able to purchase durable materials for a large number of users.
- Girls are often the ones who maintain latrines, and spend considerable time cleaning them up to three times a day and fetching water from distances of a kilometre. Girls who

fetch water from the lakeside are more exposed to bilharzia. The Ministry of Health estimates that in lakeside districts up to 80 per cent of children are infected with bilharzia.

- Disabled and young children often do not use facilities because of their unsuitable design, poor hygienic conditions and fear of collapse.
- School committees, teachers and students have an opportunity to improve the management and monitoring of facilities through their involvement in the selection of designs and the preparation of construction guidelines.

Potential outcome of SSHP

- Involvement of locally elected officers in sanitation-promotion training: gaining technical know-how they will support improved construction and workmanship through informed monitoring.
- Improved workmanship through the establishment of construction guidelines and standards for schools will potentially increase the confidence of children to use facilities and encourage good sanitation practices in schools.
- Improved facilities will decrease

time spent repairing and cleaning facilities by girls and women.

- Capacity building at district-level will ensure that officers are better able to implement school health-based initiatives in schools. Furthermore, collaboration with UNICEF offices in other countries and information-sharing through workshops and exchange visits will provide important opportunities to improve the existing capacity to implement SSHP initiatives.
- Social marketing of sanitation options and presenting communities' choices of sanitation facilities based on sound research will encourage the adoption of appropriate technologies in homes and schools.

School sanitation and hygiene promotion offers an opportunity for resource mobilization through the creation of a larger school-based health programme, covering the areas, for example, of: AIDS/HIV prevention; improvement of school nutrition through the establishment of school gardens using compost from latrines; de-worming activities; and, less directly, the retention of adolescent girls in schools and improvement of the quality of educational services and facilities.



Poor hygiene conditions affect children's access to education