



## School sanitation and hygiene education – ‘SWASTHH’

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IN MANY DEVELOPING countries schools are the only organized institutions available in villages and communities which offer a place for children to learn and play. However, in many countries schools have very poor or even lack proper water and sanitation facilities which inevitably means an unsanitary, unhealthy and inconvenient environment for children that may consequently contribute to poor hygiene habits, absenteeism and drop out rates<sup>1</sup> particularly among girls.

Since schools are important learning places, the promotion of personal hygiene and environmental sanitation within schools help children to adopt good habits during formative childhood. The provision of safe water and sanitation facilities are as much a basic need as a right for all children. Moreover, good hygiene education will improve the health and attendance of children and is likely to result in a lower drop out rates.

School sanitation and hygiene education (SSHE) is therefore the combination of hardware and software components that are necessary to produce a healthy school environment. The hardware components are the water and sanitation facilities in and around the school compound. The value of new and improved facilities nevertheless have minimal consequences without the support of hygiene education programmes helping schoolchildren make deliberate choices with regards to water and sanitation related behavior. In essence, it is the combination of hard and software components that prevent water and sanitation-related diseases (Unicef and IRC, 1998).

This brief paper sets out to focus on some of the main challenges in SSHE. It also mentions one UNICEF SSHE programme in India and presents some key concluding questions.

### What are going to be the up-coming challenges ahead for SSHE?

SSHE is an integral package of school education systems and needs to be recognized and endorsed by all stakeholders involved in education. School sanitation, in essence requires an inter-sectoral approach within education, health, water and sanitation and other sectors. Overall, the importance of SSHE needs to be recognized by all levels, but certainly needs to be supported and advocated by national governments to ensure long-term sustainability. SSHE inevitably face a number of different challenges from the political, institutional, financial, technical and social per-

spective. The following list contains some of the main issues in SSHE. The reader should be aware that this list is not exhaustive. Nevertheless it provides some of the main challenges which currently exist and need to be focused on in future SSHE projects.

### Why ‘SWASTHH’?

Together with UNICEF, IRC will be involved in a School Sanitation and Hygiene Education project in three states, namely Bihar, Karnataka and Tamil Nadu. The name given to this project is ‘SWASTHH’ (School, Water and Sanitation Towards Health and Hygiene) which means *healthy* in Hindi. The focus of this project will be on developing innovative activities concerning the improvement of hygiene practices and environmental conditions within and outside the schools and communities. The overall aim of the project will be to ensure that the present and future health and education of school-aged children improve through better hygiene behavior and a healthy school environment<sup>2</sup>.

Data obtained from the Sixth All India Education Survey of 1993 from 32 States shows that only 44.2 percent schools have safe drinking water facilities. The assumption that in year 2000 the coverage will have improved is belied by the comparative data from the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> survey. The clean drinking water coverage has in fact declined slightly from 46.6 in 1986 to 44.2 in 1993. This further masks the fact that there are no figures to show what percentage of these sources are functioning and are maintained in reasonably good condition to actually provide clean drinking water to children.

The corresponding figures for urinals in 1986 and 1993 are 15 percent and 19 percent respectively. In 1986 only 4.8 percent schools had separate urinals for girls, which increased to 8.7 in 1993. In 1986 only 6.4 schools had lavatories which increased to 10.86 in 1993. Separate lavatories for girls were present in 3 percent and 5 percent schools in 1986 and 1993 respectively.

Sanitation and Hygiene education in curricula of primary school age group shows wide variation across states. In some states there are virtually no lessons for Class I and II children. In class III some lessons are there under Environment Studies. In classes IV and V again some lessons are transacted but are not commensurate with the higher learning capacity of children. Personal Hygiene issues are dealt with during Prayer and are far from comprehensive. There are virtually no activity based learning, learning by

**Table 1: Some of the main challenges in SSHE**

**Political aspects**

- Supporting and informing policy on SSHE
- Acknowledging local authorities/politicians who support better SSHE practices;
- Getting the child back into the center of development
- Implementing policies which make safe water and sanitation facilities at schools and hygiene education compulsory
- Involving all stakeholders to develop an inter-sectoral approach which include the education, health, water and sanitation sectors.

**Institutional aspects**

- Implementing a demand driven approach to reflect genuine interest by schools
- Working through existing organizations and development infrastructure
- Moving towards group 'ownership' of SSHE projects

**Financial aspects**

- Focusing on funding at the national and regional level
  - specific activities include advocacy, programme design for school, water, sanitation and hygiene education/school health promotion, monitoring, evaluation and inter-agency co-ordination
- Mobilizing financial support for the:
  - Construction and installation of the facilities and their maintenance
  - Enhancing teachers' capabilities and production of teaching materials

**Technical aspects**

- Providing adequate hardware facilities
- Educating school teachers and pupils on the operation and maintenance aspects of facilities
- Developing design options and minimum standards
- Building local capabilities for soft and hardware issues

**Social aspects**

- Promoting a structured, child-centered curriculum appropriate to the child's developmental level, abilities and learning style;
- Placing high priority on the needs of children, over the needs of other actors in the system
- Equipping students to serve as agents of change within their families and community
- Stimulating gender equity in all SSHE activities

observation, discussions and problem solving. Teaching aids are also far from satisfactory. Considering that an estimated 60 million primary school children in the country are under an organized school based network with the potential to reach out to siblings, parents and other family members, the impact of empowering children with basic knowledge of wat-san-hygiene-health and nutrition cannot be emphasized enough. It is argued that the key to breaking the stagnation in infant mortality rates and malnutrition in under 5 children lies in the fundamental development action of raising the female education levels and in improving the quality of the wat-san environment and through knowledge for improving personal, household and community hygiene behavior. Unless and until the faecal – oral transmission of diseases is cut through proper understanding of the route of contamination, the freedom from waterborne and other communicable diseases will remain an illusive goal.

This 'SWASTHH' programme will initially run for two years. In the first two years the project will focus on five districts in three States, namely Bihar, Karnataka and

Tamil Nadu and is expected to cover approximately 500 primary schools and 250 pre-schools in each district. Strategies include a strong element of decentralization and local capacity building with flexibility to test and explore designs and methods. Some of the specific activities in this programme will include packaging approaches, methods, techniques and materials to be used by the school, adapting designs for school sanitation facilities and developing other school sanitation communication materials for teachers and students. Inevitably, it is too early to comment on the direction of this two-year project, however signs from the national, state and district levels reflect strong interest in inter-sectoral co-operation which should result in successful outputs.

**Conclusion**

This brief paper has given an overview on some of the main challenges ahead and touched on the 'SWASTHH' programme in India. Based on some of the main SSHE issues mentioned, the principal challenges of the next decade will not only be technology questions- the "hardware" of water

supplies and sanitation- but the “software” issues. Questions such as: how can the water supply and the education sector effectively support schools? How can we learn from experiences gained so far with relation to ways to motivate children to undertake proper hygiene habits? and how can schools be a resource and a center of development influencing adult behavior? will become extremely prevalent in this new millennium.

### References

UNICEF and IRC. 1998. A manual on school sanitation and hygiene. Water, Environment and Sanitation Technical Guidelines Series- No.5. New York.

<sup>1</sup>Also refer to Snel, M., Bolt, E., and Postma, L. 2000. Challenges facing School sanitation and hygiene educa-

tion from the perspective of the school teacher. Waterlines. July.

<sup>2</sup>UNICEF with technical support from IRC is also involved in a Global SSHE project which is being carried out in six countries, namely: Vietnam, Nepal, Colombia, Nicaragua, Zambia and Burkina Faso.

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