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LOCAL ACTION WITH INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION TO IMPROVE AND SUSTAIN WATER, SANITATION AND HYGIENE SERVICES

Scaling up menstrual hygiene management

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Good menstrual hygiene is crucial for the health, education and the dignity of girls and women. The knowledge and ability of women and girls to manage their menstruation both hygienically and with dignity is fundamental to achieving gender equality. Improvements in Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) contribute to sustainable development goals 3, 4 and 6 specifically and are associated intricately to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) facilities, knowledge and behaviors. The lack of information and gender friendly facilities at school, coupled with negative attitudes contributes to girls missing out on approximately 11% of school time in Uganda (IRC, 2013). Plan International Uganda utilizes multi-dimensional approach to galvanizing menstrual hygiene management focusing on private partnership to improve access to pads, income generation and improved MHM related knowledge, attitudes and practices. This paper aims to explain the project's theory of change, implementation strategy and the ongoing evolution towards an MHM sustainable model.

Introduction

Menstrual hygiene is essential for health, education and dignity of both girls and women yet less prioritized at households with low income across Uganda. It is still being considered a secluded issue culturally not talked about in public. However it contributes to girls missing 1- 3 days of Primary school per month; 8-24 days per year and 11 % of schooling missed due to menstrual periods (IRC, 2013). This is contributed to by a range of issues among which lack of gender friendly latrines, lack of privacy, shared latrines among boys and girls and sometimes teachers. A baseline study conducted among 3 districts specifically in Uganda revealed lack of pads contributing to a lesser percentage (2%), compared to discomfort (51%) 16% due to, lack of water (WAF, 2013).

Premised on the above, Plan International Uganda over the last four years has been implementing a Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) program among 4 districts (Lira, Kamuli Tororo and Aleptong) in Uganda. The overall goal of the program is to increase access to cost-effective sanitary products for the effective management of menstrual hygiene. To realize this goal, the programme adopted multi-dimensional approach to galvanizing MHM focusing on private partnership to improve access to pads, income generation and improved MHM related knowledge.

Sustainable approaches to menstrual hygiene management

Multi-stakeholder approach

Plan International Uganda model of MHM is multi-dimensional approach which aims at improving knowledge, attitudes and practices of boys, girl, women and men. This involves working with multi-stakeholders including government agencies, teachers, Village Health teams, drama groups and volunteers. These utilize participatory artistic approaches comprising drama, and radio talk shows and spots to create awareness on MHM and train on local pads production.

In bid to ensure improved access to affordable hygienic pads, Plan International Uganda opted for a public private partnership approach/model with AFRipads; a social enterprise engaged in the production and sale of the reusable pads through established Village Saving and Loan Association members.

With an ambition to localize supply of pads and improve on the income levels among women, local women groups are trained in making local pads for distribution/sale among women and girls (those who may not afford the factory made reusable pads) In addition their capacity is built in business skills to enable them manage their enterprise. At institutional level boys and girls in the school health clubs have been empowered to neat local re-usable pads which is integrated as part of the weekly art and craft session to facilitate the stock of emergency pads for use in schools

The multidimensional approach to MHM encompasses the education of the girls, health and hygiene, livelihood, gender equality and the environment as illustrated in the frame work below.

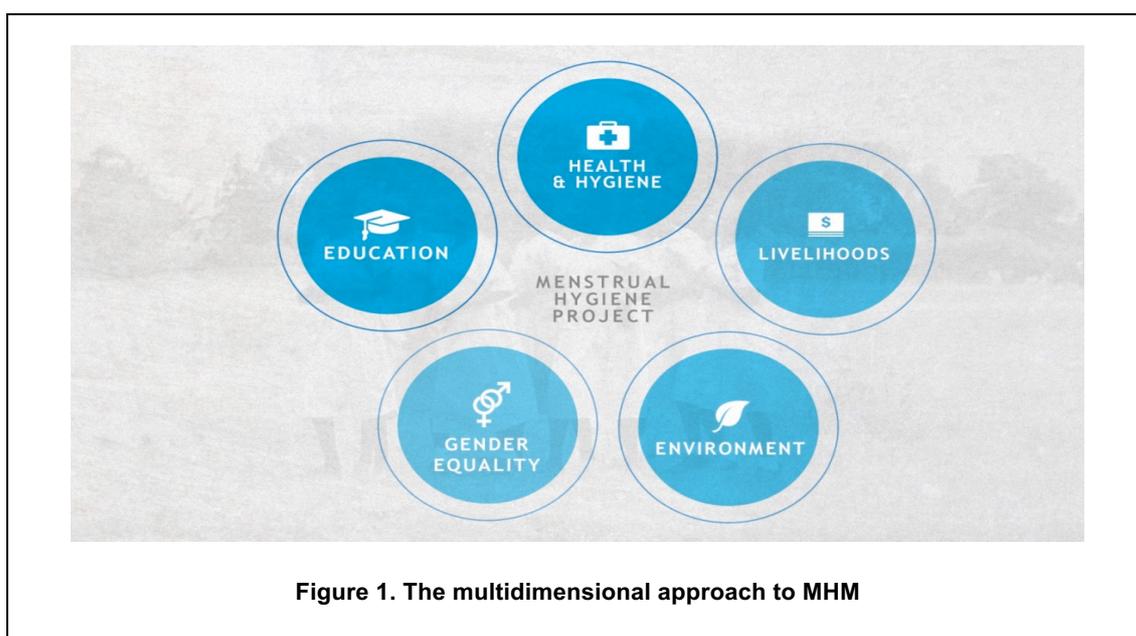


Figure 1. The multidimensional approach to MHM

Private public partnership approach

Plan International Uganda uses private partnership at different levels in delivering Menstrual Hygiene Management. It works with private social enterprises AFRipads (U) Ltd through memorandum of association to provide reusable pads through the existing Village Saving and loan association (VSLA) members in various villages. The VSLA enrolled in the sale of the reusable pads are trained in business skills to ensure proper management of the enterprise. The approach was geared towards improving access to hygienic affordable pads plus improving income for the women engaged in the reusable pads enterprise. The marketing strategy of working with VSLAs as dealers is an enabling factor as they are based in the community, facilitate expanding of Afripad kits which would be difficult with retail shops. However the approach was not effective in meeting the objective owing to: unaffordable price of pads by the adolescent girls and women (\$1.5), failure of the dealers to realise profit annually (\$51 realised versus the \$142 projected) owing to nature of the product (high life cycle) as well as product saturation. This partly contributed to high attrition rates among dealers and accounts for low sales attained (12,000 Afripad Kits over 4 years). (RM, 2014). To this effect there has been change in Afripads business model that has focused on market campaigns and awareness building in a bid to build brand awareness of sanitary pads, stimulate consumer demand, develop market presence and consumer access on pads.

Another form of partnership under the MHM program has been working with other civil society organisations within the districts of operation. Community based organisations and other International organisations are identified and oriented on menstrual hygiene management model. This is aimed at stimulating buy in and consequently integrating MHM within their existing programs. Local organization including: The Busoga trust, Kamuli Community development organization, Whave solutions, Help the aged and local women groups have adopted MHM and compliment in reaching to a wider audience beyond project scope.

Cascading model to improving knowledge, attitudes and practice

In Uganda there are myth, taboos and beliefs associated with menstruation. These have compounded to increased reluctance of people to publically discuss menstruation. In addition the naming of menstruation "Ensonga" literally meaning an "Issue" in Uganda reaffirms the attitude of unwillingness to discuss menstruation. Study conducted revealed that 25% of girls in Southern Sudan experienced cleansing rituals while 28% of the girls interviewed in Uganda reported that people around them expect restrictive movements during their menses (SNV, 2014). Among primary schools in Uganda it is common for nicknaming a girl bleeding cow by boys once she soils her dress. This inflicts a lot of fear and shame which culminates into continued school absenteeism during periods and sometimes drop out. This is affirmed by the findings of the study in Uganda in which the fear of soiling contributed to 35% of girls missing school during their menses (WAF, 2013). Therefore in order to improve the knowledge, attitudes and practices of the different stakeholders to appreciate that menstruation is normal and natural, Plan International Uganda, works together with the different government departments of Health and Education, teachers, health workers, Community health workers, drama groups, religious leaders, and School management committees. These are trained and oriented on menstrual hygiene management as Training of trainers and later engaged in training of school girls and boys, awareness creation within communities through dialogues, community theatres and radio talkshows. This has created a reliable human resource (local actors) to drive scale out of MHM.

Sanitary hard ware provision

Baseline findings revealed that girl's absenteeism and partly school dropout were largely contributed by the lack of gender friendly WASH facilities. As a result the program embedded provision of sanitation facilities to compliment software activities. The facilities are girl friendly (a Wash room connected with burning chamber) to offer convenience and privacy for girls during their menses. They are installed with a burning chamber to facilitate safe disposal of used pads. This has provided an enabling environment for girls to effectively manage their menses and continue on in school for girls.

Outcomes and lessons learnt and recommendations

Key outcomes, success and challenges

Reduced absenteeism among girls in project schools

Girl's school attendance has noticeably improved as being noted by parents, teachers, girls and boys themselves. This is being attributed to the training which improved girl's knowledge on MHM, and skills development on making reusable pads. The Mid-term evaluation findings indicated 11% reduction (from 28% to 17%) on the proportion of girls that missed school as a result of MHM interventions (RM, 2014). In some of the districts the education department has registered improvement in the number of girl's enrolment (<https://youtu.be/0fuX23m2C6Q>.)

Attitude change

Change of attitude has not only occurred among boys who now consider menstruation as normal, support those experiencing it for the first time and no longer embarrass girls in case of soiling. Among the fathers and male guardians who did not know what girls and women go through each month, they have effectively responded through purchase of pads for their daughters plus talking to them about menstruation. At community level the change has been accelerated through community theatre, as it attracts hundreds of people who come to learn and acquire knowledge on issues women and girls face.

Access to pads has increased

The partnership with Afripads has enabled Plan International to reach out to women and girls with reusable pads plus reaching out to other men, boys, girls and women beyond Plan's operation through the CSOs oriented and trained on MHM. More than 35% of respondents during MTR acknowledged using Afripads compared to 1% registered at the inception of the project (RM, 2014).

Thanks to skill development, girls and women are now able to make locally made pads for use and have been joined by men and boys who either make pads for sale or for sisters and their mothers at home. The

training on pad making includes boys while at school and men within different groups to learn together with girls and women respectively.

Challenges

Low income among households: Whereas Plan International Uganda desires to have every rural adolescent girl and woman access hygienic and affordable sanitary pad, the low income levels of the households continue to impede the realisation of the t objective. This is made worse by household dependency on entirely agriculture for their livelihood which has been hit by unreliable erratic weather leading to poor crop yields. The purchase of the pads depends on mostly on good crop harvests which enables households to sale part of their produce to acquire other household items including the pads. The building of capacity of adolescent girls and women groups in locally making intermediate affordable re-usable pads is an intermediary option towards increasing access to pads especially for those at bottom of the pyramid.

Partnership with AFRIPads: Noticeably the reusable pads promoted by AFRIPads are a durable product which once purchased by one consumer then it takes another year for that consumer to get another set. This has created tension between the social enterprise which requires profits and returns within a short period and Plan International whose target is not only on access but the social outcome from its activities.

Lessons learnt

One size does not fit all: At the commencement of the project Plan International was solely promoting AFRIPads menstrual kit within communities of operation. However the product development, change in packaging and price affected the final consumers. This necessitated Plan to venture into building capacity of women groups to make locally made reusable pads alongside AFRIPads factory made kits to enable women and girls choose what was affordable yet hygienic. This has adopted among 2 districts of Lira & Aleptong in Uganda.

Holistic integrated approach: Menstrual hygiene Management requires a holistic integrated approach to improve knowledge, attitudes and practices within communities coupled with provision of pads hand outs and the gender friendly WASH facilities. Unless the issues surrounding culture and the knowledge gaps are dealt with, then it will take long before registering the required impact. A single initiative implemented in isolation will not translate into impact.

Working in partnership: To deliver and register impact on menstrual hygiene management there is need to work in partnership at all levels as each plays a different role and in sustaining the program. At policy level the Ministry of Education plays a key role and they need to be involved throughout the design and implementation f or buy in of the strategy and oversight role, schools and communities are an entry point since most of the affected girls are at school and those to be influenced (women, men, boys) live within specific communities. Delivering on an MHM requires a spectrum of actors including private sector (AFRIPads), Civil Society Organisations (Local women groups) to fill gaps which NGOs cannot attain notably manufacture and sale of pads. There is no doubt for continuous provision of services beyond the program lifespan.

Community theatre and dialogue is a participatory approach in not only identifying practical issues within a community but also a strong tool in formulating workable local solutions to different issues identified during the session within a community. MHM being a sensitive and private issue labelled for girls and their mothers, a skit portraying the situation and how it impacts on the education, health and wellbeing of a girl and woman delivers the message home and communities come out to confess that these are daily happenings within their homes and communities which need to be addressed.

Boys and men inclusion within the program: From the Ugandan perspective where boys make it impossible for girls to stay at school due to hurling insults on them when they soil their dresses due to lack of appreciation of what happens to women in puberty and some men not knowing what girls and women go through yet they are the fiancé controllers as heads of households, they need to be brought on board at the same time for understanding and appreciation of what happens to boys and girls in order to the break the culture and take menstruation as normal in order to support effectively.

Gender friendly WASH facilities: Menstrual Hygiene Management is not complete without the provision of appropriately designed gender and disability friendly facilities. It is important that facilities at schools are designed to support the needs of the girl to enable them enjoy learning and stay at school. Latrines designed for girls must have a washroom provided and a burning chamber attached to manage the used pads, water has to be provided to enable them bath while at school on top of well trained teachers to support

Conclusion

The paper captures and shares a multidimensional approach to scaling of MHM based on the emerging challenges and opportunities. It has shown the evolution to a sustainable model in partnership with the private sector. Over the four years Plan international Uganda has gained expertise on accelerating MHM and will use of lessons learnt to inform future programming on MHM. It's now clear that implementing MHM to scale requires tackling the knowledge attitudes and practice as well as increasing access to hygienic pads in partnership with multi-stakeholders. The program has impacted on the girl's education through increased attendance and a multi-stakeholder holistic and integrated model is the ideal model for scaling out MHM.



Photograph 1. A burning chamber attached to the washroom stance on a girl's latrine



Photograph 2. Drama group using community theatre to raise awareness.

Source: Jane Nyaketcho,
Plan International December 16

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