Learning lessons on sustainability in Bangladesh

School girls in Bangladesh © Herma Majoor, www.worldcook.net

The challenge

Sustainability is a major challenge for school water, sanitation and hygiene education programs. After facilities are constructed they too often become dirty, are badly maintained and fall into disuse or spread disease. This issue is particularly relevant in Bangladesh where, since 1992, UNICEF has supported school programs with the Department of Public Health Engineering (DPHE) and the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). While there have been notable achievements on a project basis, the sustainability of those achievements is in doubt. The opportunity now exists for school sanitation and hygiene education to be part of a sector-wide approach in education and this may provide the right conditions for improving the sustainability of the results.

Bangladesh

Population with sustainable access to improved sanitation: 48 %
improved water source: 75 %

Number of primary schools: 78,000
Primary enrolment: about 20 million
Net female primary enrolment: 86 % of girls
Children in Grade 5 as percentage of Grade 1 students: 54 %

No national data is available for WASH in schools, however a UNICEF survey (2004) of 4300 schools showed:

- *Only about half (53%) had functioning water source*
- *On average, one latrine for 153 children*
- *19% of schools had no working latrine, 25% had only 1 latrine.*

Activities at school level

When the UNICEF initiative first began in 1992, it was limited to the construction of latrines and safe water supply in primary schools in 16 districts. Schools were selected by the Directorate of Primary Education in consultation with DPHE and UNICEF. By the year 2000, about 5,000 primary schools in 44 districts or 6.4 percent of all school in Bangladesh had facilities provided by the program. Based on lessons learnt the project strategy went through major revisions in 1995, 1998 and 2000. An important change was the addition of hygiene education as an important component.

Other important changes in the strategy were:

1. Construction of water and sanitation facilities by the School Management Committees instead of contractors
2. Demand responsive: To enter the program, a school has to apply and provide a plan about use and maintenance of facilities.
3. Yearly school plans and hygiene lesson for each of the classes one per week
4. Student brigade (student health club) activities at school and in community as a "learning by doing" process. This is compulsory for all students of grades 4 and 5.

School boy © Herma Majoor, www.worldcook.net

Between 2001 and 2005, activities related to water, sanitation and hygiene were supported in almost 5000 primary schools. About 1,700 schools out of this number received new water and/or sanitation facilities or had major repair of their existing facilities. While the project lasted, it ensured that both boys and girls had access to latrines that were clean and open at all times. Student Brigade (children's water and sanitation club) provided opportunities for children to support hygiene promotion efforts at home and in the community.

Lessons Learned

It has been observed that **beyond the lifetime of the project there tends to be deterioration** in the operation and maintenance of facilities, and hygiene education activities taper off. Many of the toilets built in the mid 1990s had fallen into disuse by the beginning of the new phase of the project in 2001 due to lack of maintenance. Anecdotal evidence shows that hygiene promotion efforts, including the maintenance and cleanliness of toilets in the schools, decreased in some schools just five months after the UNICEF supported project came to an end. Interestingly, the community component of this project continues to flourish and in some instances has shown improvements during this same time.

The problem of sustainability probably has its root in **the role of the Education Sector**, and especially the Directorate of Primary Education (DPE). The project has been a component of a wider project, which has been managed by the Public Health Engineering Department. Thus the involvement of the Education Directorate has been **peripheral from the start**. Although it has been supportive during implementation, there has been little attempt to mainstream the process. The activities are seen as additional to normal school activities and not requiring long-term support.

It also seems that the education department **does not automatically consider issues of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools to be its responsibility or priority**. In the development of the sector-wide approach for primary education, despite considerable resources being planned for construction and repair of schools, very limited provision was made for the construction of toilets for school children. This was an opportunity lost.

Nevertheless the **sector-wide approach** for primary education may, in the end, provide the basis for mainstreaming of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools into primary schools in the country. UNICEF has recently been able to engage the interest of DPE and DPHE in the issues of sustainability and to examine the lessons being learnt on the disadvantages of the project approach. The existence of School Management Committees provides the basis for the primary interest in the sustainability of school facilities to be at local level. If these committees can be supported by education departmental officials at the relevant administrative levels, backed up by a national commitment for mainstreaming of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools through the sector-wide approach, then the hard lessons learnt through the project over the last 16 years will have been worthwhile.

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Annex

About the WASH in schools case studies

Developed by IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre under the SSHE Global Sharing project financed by UNICEF.

Over the decade a rich poor of experience and programming has evolved in school programs for water, sanitation and hygiene education, which we call WASH in schools or SSHE. Hundreds of millions of children are currently attending schools that have, in one way or another, become part of this ambitious effort to enhance the lives and life opportunities of young people around the world.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, these programs focused largely on construction. This usually meant building water points and toilets in schools. Current experience, however, has provided a strong evidence base on the crucial need to combine hardware (facilities) with software, that is, management, organization, capacity development, educational methodologies and promotion of hygiene behaviors. Participation of key stakeholders—teachers and educational staff, local government and community groups, parents and children – is seen as key to the success of these new WASH in school programs.

This collection of case studies examines both hardware and software aspects of WASH in schools and in different settings. The case studies focus in one way or another on four general themes: planning and management; actions in the school and teaching-learning; technology and design; and, scaling up or expanding WASH in schools while retaining its quality. The case studies are drawn from experience in Africa (Burkina Faso, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Senegal, Somalia, Zambia), Asia (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Vietnam) and South America (Bolivia, Colombia, Nicaragua). The case studies provide insights into programs supported by UNICEF and also by other institutions such as the Aga Khan University, Caritas, Plan International and NETWAS International. Despite the breadth of institutional and national experience upon which the case studies draw, it must be noted that these 14 papers only provide a glimpse of the rich and often exciting experience in WASH in schools from around the world. Nonetheless, this is a 'glimpse' which will hopefully provide the reader with worthwhile insights into the current state of the art in school programming. At the end of each case study there is contact information for the reader seeking further information.

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All case studies are available at the WASH in Schools web site: http://www.schools.watsan.net

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