

Using Community Health Groups as Role Models for Safe Hygiene and Sanitation Practices

By Charles Matemo, WASH Coordinator, ACF KENYA

Community Health Groups: A Vehicle for Change

Action Against Hunger (known by its French acronym ACF) Kenya has operated the Global Water Initiative (GWI) program in Bangale, Tana River District of Kenya since 2009. The district is characterized by inadequate access to safe water among rural communities, low sanitation coverage, and poor hygiene practices. As women in these communities are primarily responsible for domestic hygiene and sanitation and are also the central communication channels in the community, including a large percentage of women in development activities around WASH is crucial. Health education mainly targets women who are left behind by the pastoralist men when they migrate with their herds.

ACF's approach to promoting health education is through community health groups whose members act as role models in their communities. With this strategy, selected community members become ambassadors of change who teach others about WASH and encourage adoption of safe practices. Such practices include: hand-washing, human waste management, latrine use, maintenance, collection, recycling and management of solid waste, safe water handling, and use of different locally available water treatment methodologies.

Creating Strong Community Health Groups

After sharing information with communities about the purpose of the community health group initiative and the criteria for involvement, ACF field staff helped communities select groups of 15-20 members, mostly mothers of different ages, to engage in the groups. Identification of community health group members is based on vulnerability; especially pregnant mothers,

mothers with children under the age of five, those from female headed households, and households with low income generation capacity. In order to evaluate the level of existing knowledge and practices related to WASH, all members are assessed before trainings are conducted. Training consists of a series of interactive education sessions covering relevant WASH themes which relate directly to impact on personal well-being. To assess the level of knowledge transfer, members are given a post-test after the trainings and receive formal certification for passing the course. In order to provide members with the means to become positive role models, the program supplied soap and tools for making solid waste pits to all members.



A Community Health Group engaged in a training session

After successfully completing the training sessions, the groups are involved in WASH promotion through regular interaction with other community members, especially at communal areas such as water points. At the household level, community health group members model good practices such as water treatment before consumption, use of dish racks, and latrine and hand washing facilities construction. A sense of competition

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develops within the community once people observe others achieving safe WASH practices. For instance, after group members constructed latrines in their homes, the demand for latrines grew within the wider community. ACF conducts weekly follow-up to support the groups and monitor progress. Once they reach a more experienced level, these groups plan to take on bigger activities such as systematic community waste management.

Lessons and Recommendations

- In the local culture of target communities, women are not permitted to engage in many activities without the presence of their husbands. At the start of the intervention, the program faced challenges in convincing men to allow their wives to participate in the community health group trainings. In order to address this challenge, men were invited to attend initial meetings to gain better understanding of the purpose and benefits of the training. After a few sessions, men felt comfortable to stop attending and allowed their wives to participate freely.
- Also related to pastoral society power dynamics and culture, community health group members learn and benefit more from trainings grouped by gender. Women feel more confident and empowered to speak their minds and engage openly in gender segregated groups. Similarly, using a group structure for promoting WASH behavior change fostered a willingness of members to adopt new approaches because people did not feel like they had to make big changes alone and were supported by others going through the same thing.
- Use of non-monetary incentives can increase active participation in groups and motivation among members to be true role models for their community. For example, awarding certificates in a ceremonious way after successful

completion of all training sessions provides a sense of achievement for members. Ensuring participation of these women in community governance structures such as water management committees or village health committees is another way to recognize the expertise that they have to offer their communities. When certain members are showing especially strong commitment to the community health groups, they are assigned special tasks in the group or take a leadership role in training others by co-facilitating sessions. This not only builds their confidence, but also motivates others to do the same.

