

FEATURE

CLEAN DRINKING WATER AND SEPARATE LATRINES IMPROVE SCHOOL LIFE FOR GIRLS AND BOYS IN AFAR REGION

Ding, Ding, Ding. The mid-morning break bell sounds releasing a flurry of scampering students rushing toward the Gewane Primary School taps, newly constructed with UNICEF support. The temperature outside is climbing toward 40 degrees Celsius in what is the cool season in Ethiopia's Afar Region where some of the hottest temperatures on the planet are recorded.

The water supply coverage in Afar is only 17 per cent. A considerable number of schemes are non-functional, which makes the effective water supply coverage in the region less than 13 per cent. Sanitation coverage is even lower at less than seven per cent.

Gewane Primary School is one of 12 primary schools in Afar region targeted by a joint World Vision – UNICEF water and environmental sanitation project in Afar region. Drinking water, hand washing facilities and separate latrines for boys and girls were constructed in Gewane Primary School during the 2004 summer holidays in time for the new school year.



Ten-year-old second grader Humayso Abdo Hassen and fellow members of the recently formed Gewane Primary School Sanitation Club stand at attention next to the taps to ensure the orderly utilization of the taps. The Sanitation Club is part of the World Vision- UNICEF project and is tasked with promoting hygiene and sanitation within the school community.

"No pushing! Stand in line. You will each get your turn," Humayso shouts. It takes a few minutes but soon the four member sanitation club team have the thirsty students of Gewane Primary lined up in a straight line behind each tap. They then call each student forward.

"Wash your hands first," Humayso tells each student pointing to a hand washing poster produced by UNICEF as part of its sanitation advocacy campaign. "Your

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health is in your hands. Always wash them,” the bold lettering reads under a photograph of an Afar girl washing her hands. After they wash their hands the children cup their hands under the gentle flow of water coming out of the tap and gulp down the water which is drawn from a deep well.

“I am here to make sure that students don’t abuse this water,” says Humayso. “Most students don’t bring cups to school and sometimes the children put their mouths around the tap head when drinking. If I see a student doing that I tell them to stop because it is not healthy to make contact with the spout. If they are sick they can pass their illness to others. I show them how they can cup their hands together so that they can catch the water without it spilling over drink. It is my job to make sure our taps remain clean.

“I was very happy to see this tap when I returned to school to school after our summer holidays. In the past we had to bring our drinking water from home and in this heat one bottle was never enough. We would run home to get water to drink. If we stayed at home too long we would get in trouble.”

The joint World Vision – UNICEF project in Afar region is designed as part of UNICEF’s Girls’ Education Initiative and aims to improve school enrolment through the provision of water and sanitation facilities in target district and schools.

Primary school enrolment rates in Afar region are among the lowest in Ethiopia. In 1998 only 7.1 per cent of eligible boys and girls attended primary school. By 2002 that number had climbed to 13.8 per cent – 15.7 per cent boys and 11.5 per cent girls. Ensuring that the learning environment is conducive for girls by providing separate latrines for boys and girls is a critical component of strategies to increase girls’ enrolment rates in school.



Hassina Mohammed is twelve years old and is in the fourth grade at Gewane Primary School. She is a member of the sanitation club. Today, she is on toilet monitor duty with three other students. Hassina and her friends are responsible for the orderly use of toilet facilities. The girls’ block was built this year as part of the joint World Vision - UNICEF project.

“Last year we only had one block of toilets which were shared by all students. We did not have separate toilets for boys and girls. Boys are messy and don’t keep the toilets clean which makes it uncomfortable for us girls. When we tell them to clean up they tease and make fun of us. A new toilet block was built for the school during our summer holidays. So now we girls have our own

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toilet. My job as a monitor is to make sure that the boys don't come into our block. We also make sure that students keep the toilets clean. I am happy to be doing this, even though the kids sometimes push and shove. Having this new toilet block just for us is making a big difference in our school life."

Outside the toilet blocks are newly constructed taps. A pair of monitors from the sanitation club instruct children to wash their hands as they leave the toilets. Students stand in line listening to club members explaining the health benefits.

"If they don't wash their hands everyone will call them dirty and the teachers won't be happy with them," says Hassina. "Nobody wants to be humiliated like that so the students make sure to wash their hands."



The new water and sanitation facilities at Gewane Primary school are already making a difference in the lives of students, particularly for girls.

"I hated using the toilets before," says Hassina. "My friends and I preferred waiting to go home after school, even if we had to go badly. We have also learned a lot about how to keep ourselves healthy by doing simple things like washing our hands after using the toilet. Being part of this club encourages us to share what we have learnt not only with other students but also with those people who are not in school. We can help those who are less fortunate in our community. I want to be a doctor when I grow up because I want to heal people. Through this club I can start healing people from today."

Coverage levels for water and sanitation in Ethiopia are among the lowest in the world. According to official figures, 31 per cent of households have access to safe water, and 18 per cent of households have access to sanitation facilities. Access to safe water is defined as 20 litres per person per day within a distance of 1-2 kilometres. UNICEF aims at assisting the Government to increase water coverage from 31 to 40 per cent by 2006 and sanitation coverage from 17 to 30 percent nationally by 2006.