

Global Handwashing Day 2021

Carol Natukunda reports on how the simple act of cleaning hands can reduce illness

The Global Handwashing Day (GHWD) is celebrated every October 15, to raise awareness about the importance of washing hands with water and soap as an effective and affordable way to prevent diseases.

This year's theme 'Our Future is at Hand – Let's Move Forward Together' highlights the need for collective action to advance hand hygiene investments, policies, and programs. The current COVID-19 pandemic has shown how important it is control infection through preventive measures such as washing hands. This creates a unique opportunity for countries to implement long term programs.

In Uganda, the African Center for Global Health and Social Transformation (ACHEST) is leading the implementation of the National Community Engagement Strategy (CES) for COVID-19 response which was launched in October 2020 by the government of Uganda. To this regard, ACHEST with support from Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), hosted 5 simultaneous handwashing events in the districts of Luweero, Mukono, Busia, Amuru and Ngora. The highlight of the events were demonstrations by public health experts and village health teams on how individuals should wash their hands with water and soap and generally keep their homes clean to avoid COVID-19 and other illnesses.

Under the CES project, model households in these districts have invented a simple innovation- the tippy-tap consisting of a small water jerrycan and soap held onto a dry wooden stand and operated by a foot lever. One can wash without touching the stand – therefore stopping the spread of dirt and bacteria. The tippy tap is strategically positioned at the entrance of the households and near the latrine for every visitor to wash their hands. Health officials in these districts report that hand hygiene has seen a drop in the cases of diarrhea, dysentery, eye infections among others.

In his GHWD message, the ACHEST Executive Director Prof. Francis Omaswa emphasised that disease prevention is a component of Integrated people-centered Primary Health Care. He reminded individuals to take responsibility for their personal health. 'Your health is your responsibility, not the responsibility of the government,' he said.

The State of the World's Hand Hygiene report

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launched on GHWD 2021 by WHO and UNICEF says hand hygiene can reduce diarrhoeal diseases by 30 % and acute respiratory infections by 20 % and antimicrobial resistance. These diseases can be caused by pathogens (germs) transmitted through the air or via surfaces, food or human faeces. Because people frequently touch their face, food and surfaces, hands play a significant role in spreading disease, the report states.

The WHO Regional Director for Africa, Dr Matshidiso Moeti in her handwashing day message observed that as part of the response to COVID-19, countries, partners and communities are already investing in hand hygiene to enable people wash their hands frequently. Handwashing facilities have been placed at bus stations, markets and health-care facilities.



'Homegrown solutions have popped up across Africa. Zambia has gone a step further, introducing mobile handwashing stations with ramps and levers that can be operated by knees, feet or hands for people living with disability. In Ghana, a taxi driver fitted an automated handwashing machine on his car for passengers to use. The challenge now is to scale-up these and other innovations, and this is where public-private partnerships and funding incentives can

play a key role. Through cooperatives or similar institutions, governments could make available small loans to households for indoor plumbing and washbasins,' stated Dr. Moeti

The handwashing report notes that the rates of access to hand hygiene facilities remain stubbornly low. Globally, 3 in 10 people – or 2.3 billion – do not have access to basic handwashing facilities with water and soap at home. Facilities are also missing in many health care facilities, schools and public places.

WHO predicts that if countries invested about 1USD per person in hand hygiene, all the households in the least developed countries could have handwashing facilities by 2030. This would provide basic protection against diseases, avert future outbreaks and save lives.

Community empowerment and engagement is important to ensuring that people have access to the services they need. Prof. Omaswa urged the local population to form village intersectoral committees which meet regularly to look for solutions to issues affecting them.

'What you can't do is rely on the higher authorities. But they can only help you if you are interested to help yourselves,' said Prof. Omaswa