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Linking WASH and Health for 'Healthy Start'

The lives of thousands of newborns and children below five years could be saved as stakeholders begin a new journey towards making water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) the underpinning factor in health delivery.

This follows the unveiling of WaterAid Ghana's *"Healthy Start"* campaign to WASH sector stakeholders at the fiftieth edition of the National Level Learning Alliance Platform (NLLAP 50), which was held on Thursday 19th March, 2015 at the at the Coconut Grove Regency Hotel, Accra.

The NLLAP 50 was dedicated to: *"WASH and Health linkages: The Healthy Start Project"* of WaterAid Ghana (WAG). Chaired by Ebenezer Charway, Asst. Director at the Water Directorate, NLLAP 50 was used to highlight WASH and Health linkages; present the Healthy Start Campaign to stakeholders; and solicit support for the implementation of the project. This communiqué is meant to share with you, dear WASH sector stakeholder, the key highlights of NLLAP 50.

The Campaign

As a new strategic focus, WAG is focusing on "infant mortality and child health" in a four-year initiative dubbed: "Healthy Start." At the crux of the initiative is WAG's position that WASH must be integrated with the health needs of children under the age of five (or Under-5 children).

WAG contends that in the year the world replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), it is time to ensure that the next generation of children is given the best start in life – a healthy start.

This is against the backdrop that it is estimated that around the world, one in every 50 births leads to heartbreak for parents, as their precious newborn son or daughter will die before they are a month old.

Progress in reducing neonatal deaths has been slower, falling by only a third between 1990 and 2012. As a result, babies who die in the first month of life now account for 44% of all deaths of children under five, compared to 37% in 1990.

Besides, calculations on Ghana suggest that approximately 19,000 Ghanaians, including 5,100 children under 5, die each year from diarrhoea – nearly 90% of which is directly attributed to poor water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH), according to Dr. Chaka Uzondu, WAG's WASH and Health Focal Person.

Building Links

Presenting on ***"Linkages between Water, Sanitation, Hygiene (WASH) and Health"*** at NLLAP 50, Consultant Dr Sylvia Anie stated that "WASH underpins human health." She established that "Globally, 2.4 million annual deaths (4.2% of all deaths) could be prevented if everyone practiced appropriate hygiene and had good, reliable sanitation and drinking water."

According to her, improving access to clean drinking water and safe sanitation is one of the least expensive and most effective means to improve public health and save lives. One reason is that in Ghana, six (6) out of the top 10 diseases are WASH-related: malaria, skin diseases and ulcers, diarrhoeal diseases, acute eye infections, intestinal worms and anaemia.

Dr. Anie adduced further evidence of the role of WASH when she highlighted the case of diarrhoea. According to her, although the ''big three'' terrors of public health are HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria, "one disease alone kills more young children each year than all three combined." She named the disease as "Diarrhoea!!!!". Thankfully, "the key to its control is safe and accessible water, proper sanitation and hygiene."

Therefore, in areas where water is safe and accessible and proper sanitation and hygiene is practiced, one expects a significant reduction in deaths of children under five due to WASH related infections; a reduction in people admitted to health centres; and an increase in the number of girls and boys enrolled and retained in education.

Participants of NLLAP 50 were provided more indication of the role of WASH in healthcare delivery when Dr. Atsu Seake-Kwawu, Resident of the Faculty of Public Health, Ghana College of Physicians and Surgeons, delivered a presentation on ***"Lessons from the 2014 Cholera Outbreak in Ghana."***

"One study done during the outbreak revealed that drinking street vended sachet water put those involved at six times more risk of getting the disease, than those who did not," Dr. Seake-Kwawu revealed. He said the study also revealed that eating street vended food was associated with getting cholera, while home prepared food and regular hand washing with soap and water after defecating were protective against cholera.

Participants were even more compelled when WAG's Dr. Uzondo Discussed ***"Sanitation-Hygiene and the Health of the Nation."*** He said "Diseases attributable to poor sanitation currently kill more children globally than AIDS, malaria and measles put together, and diarrhoea is the single biggest killer of children in Africa."

But "Sanitation access lowered the odds of children suffering from diarrhoea by 7-17%, and reduced mortality for children under-five by 5-20%."

Forward movement

Going forward, Ibrahim Musah, Head of Policy and Partnership at WAG, believes that one of the first things is to recognise that the Healthy Start campaign fits perfectly into a number of initiatives at both the global and national levels. He named, for instance, the Every Woman, Every Child (EWEC) policy which aims to save the lives of 16 million women and children by 2015, in line with MDGs 4 and 5. The EWEC was launched by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon during the United Nations Millennium Development Goals Summit in September 2010.

He mentioned other global level policy imperatives, which foster the WASH and Health sector integration, as: Every Newborn Action Plan, which is aimed at ending newborn deaths; the integrated Global Action Plan for Pneumonia and Diarrhoea (GAPPD); and the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN), which is a global movement that aims to catalyze and scale up current efforts to improve nutrition, particularly for pregnant women and children under 2.

At the national level, Musah named the following as imperatives at the Ghana country level: Child Health Policy, Child Health Strategy, Expanded Programme on Immunization, MDG Accelerated Framework, and Global Funded Programme for Malaria, TB, and HIV.

Beyond rolling the above enumerated policies, NLLAP 50 concluded with the understanding that the underlisted steps and measures should be taken.

1. National level leadership should coordinate both national and international efforts, committing to align financial and technical support with country plans
2. Strategic Alliances should be built between WASH and health sectors at local and national levels to raise the visibility of WASH issues
3. National and Local Governments must work with communities, CBOs, CSOs to promote WASH-Health integration
4. Improve inter-sectoral collaboration and coordination
5. Government must commit to ensure that every health care facility has consistent and continuous safe water and safe toilets for patients (separate for men and women, secure, child friendly and inclusive); and No new health care facility or school should be built without WASH fully addressed
6. National, regional, and district health and nutrition initiatives would include WASH
7. Monitoring and assessment of the realization of universal health coverage should include WASH
8. Government must commit to ensure that Financing for WASH is adequate, timely and predictable
9. WASH advocates should lobby for increased investment for WASH and Health in the overall Health budget as well as increased allocations at district level
10. Hygiene Promotion should be culturally appropriate, community led, systematic and nationwide
11. Investigate WASH socio-cultural beliefs and practices and community notions of health/ disease
12. Enhance the capacity of partners in WASH-health
13. Investigate associations between poor WASH facilities and health outcomes e.g. cholera outbreak

The NLLAP is a WASH sector multi stakeholder platform with the overall goal of improving sector learning and dialogue. It is hosted by the Ghana WASH Resource Centre Network (RCN). The platform offers learning and sharing opportunity for sector players as one of the practical approaches to improving sector engagements/sharing with the long term aim of achieving a knowledge driven WASH sector that delivers quality and sustainable services in Ghana. NLLAP meetings take place on the last Thursday of every month and opened to all interested parties. The discussions of each NLLAP meeting are summarized and shared with the wider WASH community. The topics of upcoming meetings are decided on by the RCN secretariat and a list of upcoming meetings can be found on the RCN website **www.washghana.net**.

If you are interested to propose a topic for a meeting please contact us on,
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