



Talia Meeuwissen, UN Volunteer WASH Officer with UNICEF Kenya, at the launch of Kenyan Sanitation Alliance, speaking about the importance of sanitation and hygiene on the health of every woman and child in Kenya.

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## Towards achieving universal access to sanitation and hygiene

Kenya is one of 26 countries that are responsible for over 90 per cent of the global burden of open defecation. In 2021, fewer than three in ten people in Kenya had access to a hand-washing station. The sanitation and hygiene situation in Kenya inspired UN Volunteer Talia Meeuwissen to help communities and the Kenyan government achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation.

I joined the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) as a UN Volunteer in the water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) team shortly after the first COVID-19 outbreak in Kenya in May 2020. Almost immediately after I started my assignment, traveling to the field was no longer safe due to the rising COVID-19 infection rates in the country.

However, I had the opportunity to interview public health officers and UNICEF staff on how the pandemic has impacted the sanitation and hygiene programme in Siaya County. I listened to their stories where they described

a time when cholera and diarrhea were rampant in their community due to poor sanitation and hygiene practices. I started to understand how toilets and hand-washing are essential to staying healthy—particularly for women and children.

After doing a bit more research, I found out that Kenya is one of 26 countries that are responsible for over 90 per cent of the global burden of open defecation. In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic was a stark reminder that hand-washing is one of the simplest and most effective ways of preventing the spread of disease and infection. In 2021, fewer than 3 in 10 people in Kenya had access to a hand-washing station. These stories helped illustrate the sanitation and hygiene situation in Kenya and inspired me even more to help Kenya achieve UN Sustainable Development Goal 6.2 to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation.

Despite travel restrictions, I advocated together with the government to make sanitation and hygiene services accessible to rural communities in Kenya. For example, I supported UNICEF and the Ministry of Health in launching the Kenya Sanitation Alliance, a high-level forum that brings together governors from the 15 counties with the highest open defecation rates for the first time ever to end open defecation in Kenya. Leading up to the launch, I prepared a concept note that the Ministry of Health used to launch a country-wide sanitation and hygiene campaign, also known as the Kenya Sanitation Week. In August, I saw my concept paper come to life.

“ There were at least 96 radio mentions and ten radio talks dedicated to giving people a platform to discuss the importance of toilets and hand-washing to protect the dignity and health of every woman and child in Kenya. -- Talia Meeuwissen, UN Volunteer WASH Officer with UNICEF

Public health officers in six counties organized clean-ups in their communities and held demonstrations in the streets to raise awareness about the devastating consequences open defecation can have on the health of individuals and communities. I also created advocacy tools such as banners and 48 Sanitation Profiles, which give a snapshot of the sanitation

and hygiene situation in a given county and the country as a whole. These factsheets and banners were largely used on social media platforms.

In addition to my work on the Kenya Sanitation Alliance, I have also published papers, briefs and factsheets that ultimately help advocate for improved sanitation and hygiene services at the national and international levels. Perhaps one of my proudest achievements was publishing a journal article in partnership with the Institute of Development Studies, a UK-based think tank affiliated with the University of Sussex.

The article is based on my research on sanitation and hygiene champions in Siaya County. The journal article focuses on experiences across three sub-national areas in East Africa where positive changes in the prioritization of sanitation by local governments have been witnessed and discusses lessons learnt. I have, in the meantime, presented this paper at the Water Engineering and Development Centre (WEDC) International Conference, which is a valued and respected platform that brings together WASH-sector professionals from all over the world.

“ Serving as a UN Volunteer for UNICEF has truly been a source of great fulfillment. The past two years have been an opportunity for me to grow professionally. Every new task here means acquiring new knowledge and skills in water, sanitation, and hygiene. This experience has taught me the importance of preventative health measures for individuals, communities and countries, which inspired me to advocate for sanitation and hygiene for all. But more importantly, my work has inspired others, including communities and government, to advocate for achieving universal access to sanitation and hygiene. -- Talia Meeuwissen



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