National Handwashing Initiative: Towards 100% handwashing coverage by 2030

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Handwashing with soap (HWWS) is one of the most effective ways to prevent diarrhoea, along with hygienic toilet use and safe water. Evidence suggests that improved handwashing can greatly impact public health. HWWS can reduce the incidence of the two leading causes of childhood mortality, diarrhoeal disease and acute respiratory infection, by more than 35%-50%.

Handwashing with soap is a cost effective disease prevention solution, a ‘do it yourself vaccine’ that saves lives. The global partnership for handwashing recommends washing hands:

- After using the toilet
- After cleaning the baby’s bottom
- Before preparing food
- Before feeding the baby

Towards 100% handwashing

In 2006, the National Sanitation Working Group (NSWG) initiated the Uganda National Handwashing Initiative (NHWI) to spearhead Handwashing with soap (HWWS) across the country. NHWI focused particularly on mothers and caregivers of children under five years and schoolchildren 6-13 years old.

The initiative is grounded in a vision that by 2030, 100% of Ugandans should practise HWWS at key times. The approach is based on the national 2006-2015 Integrated Sanitation and Hygiene Strategy. It addresses hand hygiene in relation to demand creation, supply chains and financing mechanisms and behaviour change communication, and the creation of enabling environments for handwashing.

The overall objective of the initiative is to increase the number of mothers and caregivers of children under five years who practise HWWS at key times by 4% per year. The following specific objectives were approved by the national steering committee:

- Improve the capacity of technical support units, district local governments and civil society organisations to implement and sustain large-scale HWWS
- Ensure the effective coordination of national and district partners for efficient, large-scale HWWS promotion at the district level
- Strengthen learning and knowledge management around HWWS

For sustainable HWWS interventions at scale, a systemic intervention model is critical for long-lasting behaviour change in HWWS.

The NHWI operates within the Sector Wide Approach (SWAP) led by the government and implemented under a Public-Private-Partnership (PPP) through the National Handwashing Initiative (NHWI). The NHWI uses a capacity-building approach to motivate HWWS stakeholders to accelerate national adoption of HWWS.
The NHWI has three core areas of engagement:

Technical hub: The NHWS acts as a technical hub for HWWS in the Uganda WASH sector. The initiative is a one-stop centre for data, tools, information and knowledge. The initiative also collaborates with national level platforms to ensure that results and lessons inform policy and legislation.

Research and Action Learning: The NHWI engages in “Research and Action Learning” activities informed by broader analysis of sector challenges. The initiative also supports documentation and dissemination of emerging innovations.

Coordination: Coordinating sector stakeholders to actively engage in sector events, as well as share best practices and emerging lessons.

In collaboration with SNV’s DFID funded Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All (SSH4A) program, the secretariat organised two regional practitioners’ workshops in Rwenzori and West Nile regions.

A total of 100 District Health teams and local organisations across 15 Districts were trained with practical skills on how to apply the “WASH YOUR HANDS and SAVE” messages in their community participatory hygiene promotion activities.
At the national level, the secretariat organised and facilitated a multi-stakeholder workshop on handwashing with soap behaviour change communication. The stakeholders included religious leaders, UWASNET Regional Coordinators and members of the hygiene and sanitation-working group of UWASNET. Strong buy-in was elicited and subsequently work plans were drawn by each category of participants outlining how they would integrate HWWS in ongoing interventions.

With support from UNICEF, SNV steered a national collective effort to commemorate Global Handwashing Day on the 15th of October. They partnered with the private sector, media organisations, and the Ministry of Water and Environment.

The celebrations took place in Luwero and was officiated by the Vice President, Honourable Edward Ssekandi, who pledged that the government would prioritise handwashing in the national health agenda. The Hygiene Charter was adopted during the celebrations. Stakeholders added their signatures to demonstrate their commitment to promoting sustained, high-quality hygiene services throughout the country.