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COWASH



GREETINGS

Welcome to our quarterly newsletter, your gateway into our key achievements across rural Ethiopia! In this edition we will explore key achievement from April to June 2025, where communities and partners' support turned challenges into tangible progress.

LEADING WITH A SMILE: AYNALEM DIKO'S STORY



In Wegencho Kebele of Yem Zone, laughter often rings out during Water Sanitation and Hygiene Savings and Loan Associations (WASH SLAs) meetings - and it usually starts with Aynalem Diko. The treasurer of one of Community-Led Accelerated WASH Phase Four's (COWASH IV) most successful SLAs greets everyone with a radiant smile that never fades, whether she's collecting regular contributions, explaining loan terms or celebrating her members' sanitation achievements.

WASH SLAs are one of the key focus areas of the COWASH IV project where it works with rural communities to eliminate open defecation and increase access to improved and sustainable sanitation solutions. Aynalem's SLA group is one of the six WASH SLAs established by COWASH IV in Yem Zone, Central Ethiopia. Her group which was established in the Ethiopian Fiscal Year (EFY) 2015 brought a significant change demonstrating how financial empowerment and health transformation can work hand-in-hand.
In this SLA group, Aynalem brings a unique blend of joy and precision to the leadership.

Her cheerfulness and talent for simplifying complex concepts transform routine discussions into lively, productive conversations. COWASH IV's team has observed how she transforms obligation into celebration, her smile and warmth relax postures and boosts member participation during meetings. Her leadership has contributed to the group's remarkable results where all the 24 member households have now constructed improved latrines with functional handwashing facilities.

Now as the kebele celebrates its open-defecation-free status, Aynalem's cheerful persistence continues to motivate members toward their next goal: household water connections. She says, with the initial goal of her SLA haveing being achieved, "now we want to bring tap water to our homes by increasing our savings."

Aynalem's leadership embodies COWASH IV's philosophy that sustainable change happens when communities are empowered to lead their own way. The proof shines in Wegencho's cleaner environment and their effective SLAs.



MENSTRUAL HYGIENE CHALLENGES IN RURAL ETHIOPIAN SCHOOLS PROMPT COMPREHENSIVE REFORMS



COWASH IV's recent study on Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) shows the profound impact of inadequate MHM on school attendance among girls in rural Ethiopia, prompting a major intervention program to address systemic barriers to education.

The study which was published in February 2025, was conducted across nine Woredas in five regions, surveying 1,067 schoolgirls aged 14 and older. The findings show a troubling reality of school attendance interruption, with more than half of respondents reporting missed school days due to menstruation-related challenges during the last academic year.

COWASH IV's team discovered that the lack of proper facilities creates a cascade of problems for young students. Many girls described having no private space to manage their periods at school, with some toilets lacking even basic water and soap.

Others reported being forced to discreetly wash reusable cloth pads at home or hide them under beds due to the absence of proper drying areas. The stigma surrounding menstruation emerged as equally damaging, with girls recounting experiences of teasing from classmates and discomfort discussing the issue with male teachers.

The findings highlight the critical need for continued investment in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities tailored to girls' needs. Sari Aroalho, Project Management and Development Advisor at COWASH IV, agrees stating that the "results are a clear indicator that we need to focus more on gender inclusion in our activities and support girls in their daily lives." Without such interventions, menstrual-related absenteeism could continue undermining efforts to achieve gender parity in Ethiopian schools.





Taking this into consideration, COWASH IV has implemented a comprehensive solution package that addresses both physical infrastructure and social stigma. The project has constructed dedicated MHM centers in 39 schools, complete with shower rooms, rest areas and proper disposal systems.

These facilities complement 337 new water points benefiting 215,000 students and provided 59 schools with improved latrines benefiting 57,168 students.

Zara Ali, a teacher at Fofa General Secondary School in Central Ethiopia, recommends to expand COWASH IV's MHM program to other schools as she witnessed sense of relief and stability as well as increased attendance and engagement among her female students following the construction of the MHM center.

COWASH IV's interventions extend beyond building infrastructure.

The project has launched MHM training programs to teachers and students to create more supportive school environments and established student health clubs to normalize conversations about menstrual health.

Early reports suggest these measures are already making an impact, with data showing improved attendance rates at pilot schools. In line with this, the COWASH IV team has planned to conduct a follow-up study to assess post-intervention outcomes.

For detailed findings, see the full study: https://cowash.org/pre-menstrual-hygiene-management-interventions-study/

DID YOU KNOW?

Climate change is exacerbating water scarcity and damaging WASH infrastructure through increased floods and droughts, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. COWASH IV is working to address this by integrating climate resilience into its WASH programming.

COWASH IV: DRIVING CHANGE THROUGH SOCIAL BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION



Transforming sanitation and hygiene in rural Ethiopia is a formidable task, fraught with deep-seated challenges that hinder progress towards widespread community health. With improved sanitation coverage languishing at a mere 18%, according to the 2021 Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) report by UNICEF and WHO, the path to improvement requires navigating a complex landscape.

Key obstacles include a lack of integration of social behavioral change (SBC) interventions across all relevant programs, the persistent need for more human-centered design approaches that actively involve beneficiaries and an insufficiently enabling environment characterized by gaps in capacity, systems and governance for leading SBC efforts.

Furthermore, the availability of sanitation products often fails to meet the demand created by successful SBC initiatives, and such interventions are typically cost-intensive, demanding ongoing research to adapt to evolving barriers.

"The social and behavior change in rural Ethiopia is at an infant stage that needs a lot of work," states Ebisa Feyisa, the Social and Behavioural Change Specialist at COWASH IV, underscoring the scale of the undertaking. According to him, the sector has immense potential, but it's also an area where significant progress is yet to be made.

Even with the array of challenges, there are opportunities that contribute to SBC interventions in the country. Ebsa highlights the readiness to change among the rural communities as a primary opportunity, providing fertile ground for intervention. Past gaps in program design knowledge and skills are also being actively addressed, enhancing the effectiveness of current efforts. Coupled with improving access to sanitation products, these factors are creating an increasingly favorable environment for sustainable behavioral shifts.

Contributing to efforts to change the reality, the COWASH IV project is undertaking intensive SBC interventions to deliver practical and lasting change in rural Ethiopia.



COWASH IV's Blueprint for Tackling the Challenge

COWASH IV implements a comprehensive strategy to bring SBC across rural communities. This begins with robust capacity building, involving extensive Training of Trainers (ToT) program, cascading workshops and on-the-job training programs that empower regional, zonal and woreda-level WASH experts. Crucially, the project emphasizes community engagement and mobilization through its Community Managed Project (CMP) approach. This fosters local ownership by forming and strengthening WASH committee (WASHCO) to promote hygiene, manage facilities and maintain accountability.

Interpersonal communication also plays a vital role, with health workers and community volunteers conducting regular household visits. These visits provide personalized and group counseling on crucial topics like handwashing, water treatment, safe sanitation and safe menstrual health and hygiene practices. The development and dissemination of culturally appropriate SBC materials is another key component.





To date, COWASH IV has produced and distributed over 16,020 informative posters and 15 audio-visual messages, all tailored to local norms to reinforce key WASH messages and promote a lasting change in sanitation habits.

Furthermore, COWASH IV champions the promotion of inclusive WASH practices by actively integrating gender equality, women's empowerment and disability inclusion into its strategies. A notable success in this area is the establishment of MHM centers in schools, benefiting thousands of girls.

Finally, these comprehensive SBC interventions are integrated with institutional WASH. This involves extending efforts to schools and health facilities, ensuring these institutions serve as models for proper WASH practices and, through initiatives like School WASH clubs, empowering students to influence family practices.

Measurable Impact: Transforming Lives and Communities

The impact of these efforts is increasingly visible across communities. There's an improvement in sanitation and hygiene behavior, with more individuals practicing handwashing with soap and water at critical times, adopting safer water handling and storage techniques, ensuring better latrine use and maintenance, and engaging in improved safe menstrual health and hygiene practices.

This behavioral shift is accompanied by increased knowledge and awareness regarding the critical links between poor WASH practices and disease, especially among caregivers and school-aged children. Local influencers and leaders are also more empowered to promote healthy WASH behaviour. The project is successfully fostering the sustainability of behaviour change by creating new behavioral norms around key WASH practices, reinforced by context-specific messages.

Moreover, the institutional and community capacity to promote and monitor behavior has been significantly strengthened, particularly among local health workers, schools and WASHCOs.

Critically, these efforts have led to greater gender and social inclusion, evidenced by increased participation of women and girls in WASH decision-making and a reduction in gender-based barriers to sanitation access and MHM.

COWASH IV's work in rural Ethiopia is more than just a project; it's a commitment to fostering sustainable, community-driven change. By focusing on the human element of sanitation and hygiene, even in the face of considerable challenges, it's paving the way for a healthier future.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS



Safe Water for All: Over 709,578 rural people now have access to clean water through new and rehabilitated water schemes.



Empowering Communities: 26 WASH businesses launched and 149 WASH Saving and Loan Associations established, fostering sustainable solutions.



Healthy Schools: Improved WASH facilities in 396 schools, benefiting 272,783 students.



Hygienic Healthcare: 280 health institutions equipped with water points and latrines, creating a healthier environment for patients and staff.



Menstrual Hygiene Management: 39 menstrual hygiene management facilities built, promoting women and girls' health.

KNOWLEDGE-SHARING AND PLANNING TAKE CENTER STAGE AS COWASH IV CONCLUDES ANNUAL WORKSHOP



COWASH IV successfully concluded its annual planning workshop in Bishoftu, laying the groundwork for the upcoming Ethiopian Fiscal Year 2018. Held from April 8th to 10th, 2025, the three-day event brought together 52 participants, including key personnel from all eight project regions across Ethiopia and the Federal Technical Assistance Team (FTAT). The workshop served as a crucial platform for collaboration and strategic planning.

The event kicked off on Tuesday, April 8th, with regional teams presenting comprehensive progress reports, highlighting achievements and identifying challenges from the past year. This review set the stage for focused planning sessions.

Presentations on different key topics were also conducted by the FTAT during the workshop fostering knowledge sharing among the participants. Mussie Hailegeorgis, COWASH IV's Climate and Environment Risks and Water Safety Specialist, delivered a key presentation on integrating climate resilience into WASH programming. Following this, Mulatie Yinager, the project's SME and Microfinance Institution Specialist, discussed the vital role and implementation of WASH Saving and Loan Associations in ensuring sustainability. Sari Aroalho, Project Management and Development Advisor at COWASH IV, also delivered a presentation on how to collect and input geographical coordinates.

Participants also engaged in detailed planning sessions and had the opportunity to interact directly with representatives from the Embassy of Finland and Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland during a dedicated question-and-answer session.

Throughout the workshop, COWASH IV's six-part documentary series, "Transforming Lives, Empowering Communities," was screened, providing inspiration by showcasing the real-world impact of the project.

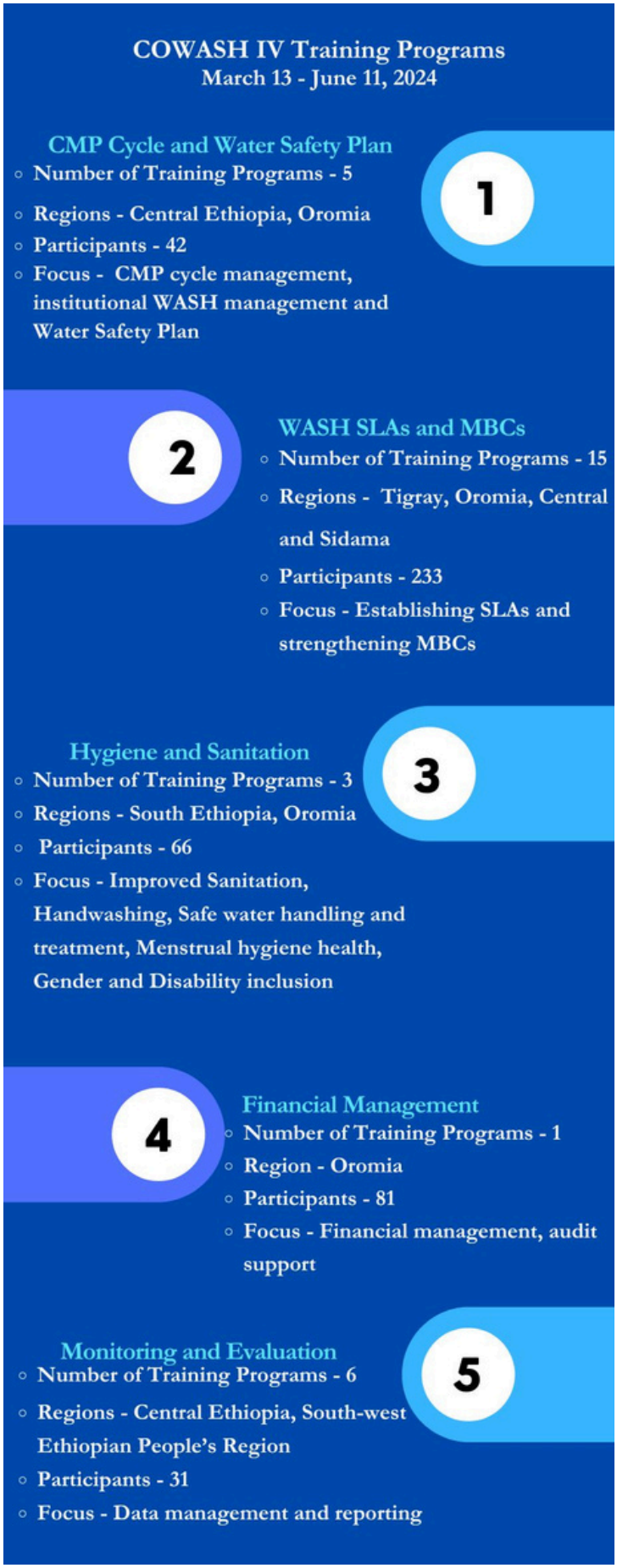




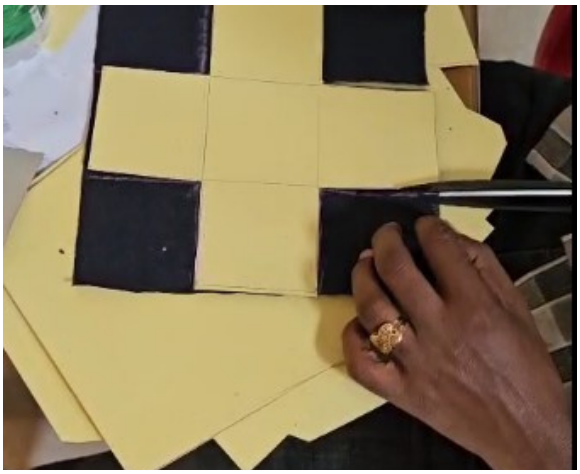
Participants highlighted the workshop's value beyond planning. "This annual planning meeting helps us meet all regional staff in one place, plan together, hear different perspectives and share experiences, especially on working under pressure," said Ermiyas Mulgueta, WASH SLA Specialist at COWASH IV.

Abeba Asegede, a CMP specialist at COWASH IV's Tigray Regional Support Unit, added that the workshop was a crucial event, providing a chance to get updates on work progress and share experiences from different regions. It particularly helped them to get updated on how well the project is progressing nationally and how its community-managed approach builds ownership, enabling effective work despite challenges, said Abeba. She also noted the event fostered team spirit and collaboration among staff from diverse regions.

With detailed action plans now being finalized, COWASH IV is poised to continue its impactful work in improving water, sanitation and hygiene access across Ethiopia in the coming year.



COWASH IV MHM TRAINING PROGRAM: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR LASTING CHANGE



The COWASH IV project recently conducted its fifth trainer's workshop on homemade reusable sanitary pad production in Tercha Town, South-West Ethiopia, from April 2 to 4, 2025. Organized in collaboration with the South-West Ethiopian People's Region Education Bureau, the training aimed to promote MHM and empower communities through practical skills.

The three-day program covered MHM, entrepreneurship skills and hands-on production of reusable sanitary pads and underwear. Nineteen trainees from Mari Mansa and Kachi Woredas, along with representatives from the Regional Bureau of Education participated in the training program.

This initiative forms part of COWASH IV's broader efforts in the region, where the project has already established four MHM centers in schools across the two project woredas.

The training builds on similar successful programs previously conducted in Benishangul Gumuz, Oromia, Sidama and Tigray regions, which have engaged various community members including teachers, students, health extension workers and local tailors.

Following the training, participants will share their knowledge through cascaded training programs. Teachers will conduct training for students while health extension workers will educate other community members, creating a multiplier effect.

The project's holistic approach extends beyond skills training. COWASH IV also conducts MHM awareness campaigns in schools, constructs dedicated MHM facilities and distributes educational comic books. These combined efforts demonstrate COWASH IV's commitment to breaking taboos, reducing stigma and creating lasting change in menstrual hygiene



COWASH IV REGIONAL COMMITTEES CONCLUDE ANNUAL REVIEW AND PLANNING MEETINGS



The COWASH IV project's regional steering committee meetings across eight project regions have successfully completed their Progress Review and Annual Plan meetings for the EFY 2018.

Held throughout May and the beginning of June, 2025 these meetings evaluated project performance during EFY 2017 and approved regional core plans for EFY 2018.

Key stakeholders including representatives from the Regional Bureaus of Water and Energy, Finance, Education, Health, Women and Children Affairs, Ministry of Finance, and Embassy of Finland as well as COWASH IV Federal Technical Assistance Team and Regional Support Units participated in these meetings.

This series of regional meetings followed the project's annual core planning meeting held in April.

Central Ethiopia hosted the first session, with subsequent meetings conducted in South Ethiopia, Sidama, Tigray, Oromia, Benishangul Gumuz and South-West Ethiopia People's Region.

The Amhara regional steering committee finalized its meeting at the beginning on June 3, 2025.



THANK YOU FOR READING!

We hope this newsletter has inspired you to learn more about COWASH IV and the communities we serve. Together, we can make a difference in the lives of rural communities in Ethiopia by ensuring access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene.

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