COWASH



GREETINGS

Welcome to the latest edition of the COWASH IV Quarterly Newsletter. This issue presents key project updates and achievements from July to September 2026, highlighting progress in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services, key project milestones, field updates and findings from recently completed studies. Inside, you'll find stories of advances in women's leadership in WASH governance, progress in water safety planning, communities adopting market-based sanitation solutions and efforts to expand access to WASH finance while encouraging lasting behaviour change.

MOVING FROM PRESENCE TO POWER: INCREASED WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN COWASH IV WASH COMMITTEES



Women's leadership in Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Committees (WASHCOs) under the COWASH IV project is steadily expanding across rural Ethiopia, marking a shift from representation to meaningful decision-making power. According to the project's recent report on gender equality and disability inclusion, 55 per cent of WASHCOs met or exceeded the target of having 50 per cent female membership, while women held 48 per cent of leadership positions.

Women also increasingly occupied executive positions, with 6.3 per cent of WASHCOs having women in all three key leadership roles: Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary.

A separate COWASH IV assessment on Women's Leadership in WASHCO Governance revealed significant progress in women's participation, recognition, influence and personal development. The assessment was conducted alongside a Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) impact assessment across the Central Ethiopia, Oromia, Sidama and South Ethiopia regions between December 2025 and April 2026.

The assessments engaged 53 women from eight project woredas through focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

The findings show that women are increasingly recognising their right to participate in community decision-making and confidently voice their opinions. Participants contrasted the current environment with the past, when women were largely excluded from male-dominated community assemblies.

Women leaders are also helping shape practical outcomes at community level. They are prioritising timely repairs of water points to maintain reliable services, promoting transparent record-keeping and fee collection practices and raising community concerns to strengthen accountability. Their growing role in local governance is helping ensure that WASH services better reflect community needs.

Beyond governance, participation in WASHCOs is helping women develop valuable leadership and life skills.



Many reported increased self-confidence, stronger public speaking abilities, improved bookkeeping and basic financial skills, and greater trust from community members as problem-solvers and decision-makers.

Despite these encouraging gains, the assessment highlights the need to address persistent barriers that can limit women's full participation. Heavy domestic responsibilities, technical language used during meetings and short notice for meeting agendas continue to affect women's ability to engage effectively. Sustained efforts are therefore needed to ensure that women's growing presence translates into lasting and meaningful governance power.

The progress achieved in women's participation within COWASH IV WASH committees reflects years of coordinated efforts from the community to the federal level. Through targeted capacity-building activities, advocacy campaigns, social and behavioural change initiatives, and training programmes reaching communities across project areas, COWASH IV has worked to address traditional barriers and strengthen women's participation in local WASH governance.

These efforts are supported by project guidelines that promote at least 50 per cent female WASHCO membership and encourage women's representation in executive leadership positions.

COWASH IV Workshop on Gender-Responsive WASH Implementation

Building on the insights generated by the assessments, COWASH IV convened key stakeholders at Sapphire Addis Hotel on 1 September 2026 to review the findings and identify practical actions for strengthening gender-responsive WASH implementation.

A total of 50 participants, including representatives from the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Health, the Embassy of Finland, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), development partners and regional stakeholders, attended the workshop.

Discussions focused on recommendations emerging from both the MHM impact assessment and the Women's Leadership in WASHCO Governance assessment. Firewoyni Solomon, COWASH IV Gender and Disability Inclusion Specialist, presented the key findings, prompting active dialogue on MHM service quality, sustainable supply chains, meeting design, institutional accountability and opportunities to strengthen women's participation.

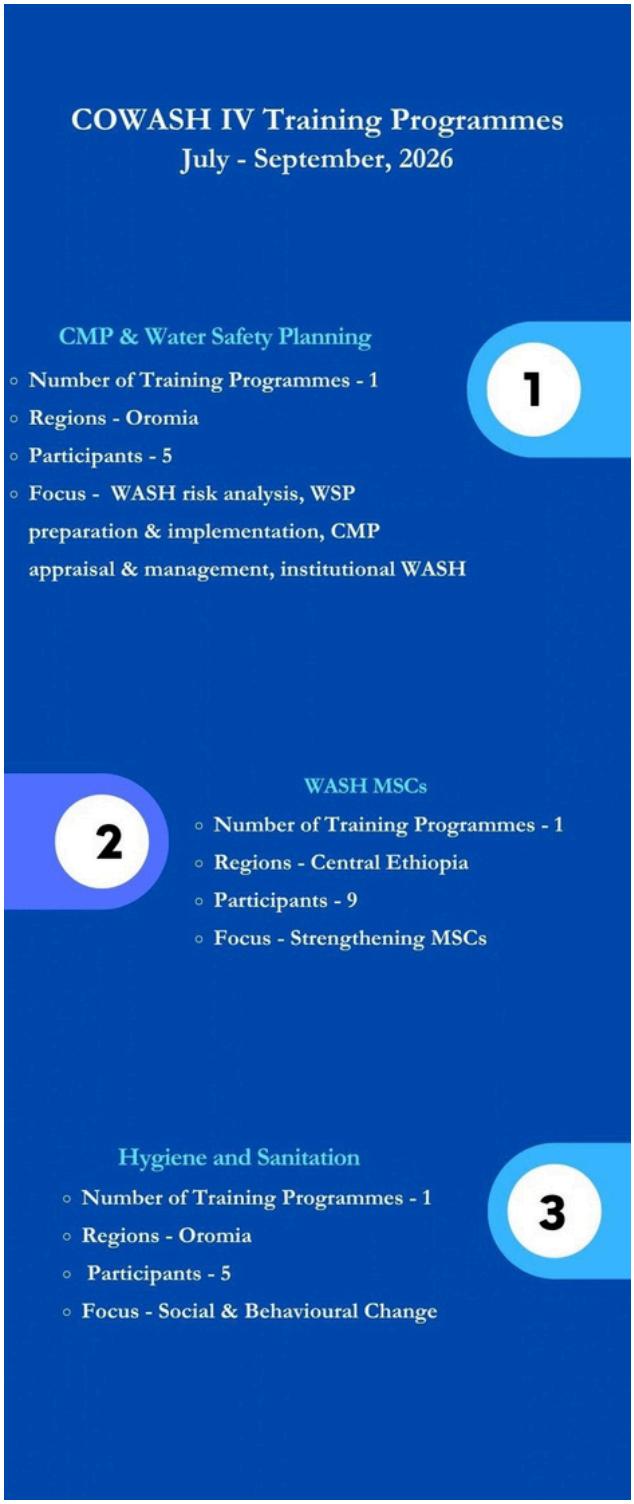




Participants praised the workshop's multi-sectoral approach. Mickal Mamo, Founder of Adey Reusable Menstrual Pads, described the initiative as "an eye-opener", noting that bringing together key actors from across the sector creates a strong foundation for collective action and meaningful change. Similarly, Brihan Woldegebriel, Gender and Disability Inclusion Specialist with the COWASH IV Tigray Regional Team, emphasised that the project is strengthening gender-responsive WASH programming through evidence-based assessments and broad stakeholder engagement.

The workshop highlighted both the progress made and the challenges that remain, underscoring the importance of continued collective action to advance gender-responsive WASH services.

By combining field-based evidence with multi-sectoral collaboration, COWASH IV continues to strengthen inclusive WASH systems that empower women and girls while supporting sustainable community development across Ethiopia.



COWASH IV NATIONAL STEERING COMMITTEE CONCLUDES END OF YEAR MEETING



The COWASH IV national steering committee successfully conducted its regular end-of-year meeting at Capital Hotel in Addis Ababa on September 3, 2026.

The meeting opened with remarks from State Minister for Water Supply and Sanitation, Dr. Ambassador Asfaw Dingamo and Embassy of Finland Head of Cooperation Mr Tomi Särkioja, who highlighted the ongoing partnership and success of the project.

COWASH IV's Chief Technical Advisor Neil Chadder presented the project's key achievements from the past fiscal year, outlined upcoming targets and shared strategic priorities for strengthening implementation in EFY 2019. Committee members commended the project's strong performance and engaged in productive discussions to refine the operational roadmap for the current fiscal year. Dr. Ambassador Asfaw emphasized the importance of the operational roadmap presented by the Chief Technical Advisor for ensuring successful project performance in EFY 2019.

During EFY 2018 alone, the project constructed and rehabilitated 1,454 community water points, benefiting 365,074 people. This brought total cumulative beneficiaries to 1,375,218 people, surpassing the initial project target of 1.1 million. This achievement was warmly applauded by committee members for its extensive impact on rural communities.

COWASH IV also constructed water supply schemes in 275 schools and improved latrines in 44 schools, benefiting 196,436 students and staff. Other key institutional achievements include construction of water points in 183 health posts alongside improved latrines in 84 health posts, capacity building training programmes reaching 20,165 people, the establishment of 208 WASH Saving and Loan Associations and the construction of MHM centers across 52 schools.

COWASH IV national steering committee members include partner ministries: the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Finance, and Ministry of Water and Energy, alongside the Embassy of Finland. Mikaela Kruskopf, Project Manager at NIRAS International and COWASH IV Home Office Coordinator, also attended the meeting.

Following the national steering committee meeting, seven project regions held their respective steering committee meetings, approving budgets and planned activities for EFY 2019. The meetings followed COWASH IV's annual progress review and planning workshop.



COWASH IV Annual Planning and Progress Evaluation Workshop

The COWASH IV annual planning and progress evaluation workshop was held in Bishoftu from August 25–27, 2026.

The workshop served as a platform for federal and regional teams to present their current implementation status, budget allocations, achievements, and strategic focus areas for the upcoming fiscal period. Subsequent sessions centered on planning for the current fiscal year, harmonization efforts and collaborative strategies.



Discussions also emphasized the continued strengthening of gender mainstreaming, sanitation initiatives, climate resilience, and outreach and promotion activities.

The workshop concluded with an agreement on the proposed action plans and strategic ways forward. Participants noted the workshop's productive outcomes, highlighting the open discussions and collaborative approach as essential for advancing COWASH IV's mission to address rural WASH needs.

As COWASH IV enters EFY 2019, the project remains committed to strengthening sustainable rural WASH services.

DID YOU KNOW?

Sustainable WASH services need sustainable financing. Through water tariffs, WASH SLAs and partnerships with local microfinance institutions, COWASH IV helps communities finance sanitation facility improvements and maintain water systems long after construction is complete.

COWASH IV PILOT SANITATION CENTRES EXPAND OPERATIONS IN SIDAMA AND CENTRAL ETHIOPIA



COWASH IV's market-based sanitation initiative is showing encouraging results, with two pilot Market-Based Sanitation Centres (MSCs) demonstrating steady business growth and expanding their operations. Following a series of targeted branding, promotion, and capacity-building efforts earlier this year, a follow-up monitoring visit conducted from August 3 to 9, 2026, highlighted key achievements by the Roori MSC in the Sidama Region and the Tesfa Zer MSC in the Central Ethiopia Region.

Expanding Production and Local Independence

Launched as part of COWASH IV's broader strategy to strengthen local sanitation supply chains, the pilot centres have demonstrated notable progress in production capacity and market reach.

Tesfa Zer MSC (Central Ethiopia Region):

Located in Hadero Tunto Woreda, Tesfa Zer has significantly scaled up its liquid soap production and supply operations. Demonstrating growing business independence, the centre now independently manages supplier relationships established through the project with vendors in Hawassa City.

To meet rising retail demand, members are arranging to rent a dedicated storefront in the woreda centre, allowing the original site to be used exclusively for manufacturing.

Roori MSC (Sidama Region)

Roori has increased its output and distribution of liquid soap products. Additionally, the centre distributed an initial allocation of plastic toilet slabs, provided through the project to local Saving and Loan Associations in Chirone Woreda. These associations are utilising the materials to facilitate the construction of improved household latrines within the community.

During the August monitoring visit, the COWASH IV team delivered remaining project materials, including storefront signboards, to ensure both facilities are fully equipped for long-term commercial operations and increased local visibility.

The initiative forms part of a wider national effort by COWASH IV, which has established 26 MSCs across six project regions. By fostering private enterprise and self-sustaining local supply networks, the project aims to ensure reliable, accessible and affordable sanitation supplies for rural communities throughout Ethiopia.



COWASH IV EVALUATES WATER SAFETY PLAN PROGRESS AT PILOT SITES IN SIDAMA AND OROMIA



The COWASH IV project team conducted field monitoring visits in August to assess progress in implementing Water Safety Plans (WSPs) at pilot sites in the Sidama and Oromia regions.

The visits focused on reviewing completed activities, infrastructure improvements, implementation challenges and results achieved, assessing community-led management and coordinating with local government offices to ensure long-term, climate-resilient water supplies.

Protecting the Abay Boreta Water Supply System in Sidama

From August 11 to 12, 2026, the COWASH IV team completed a monitoring visit at the Abay Boreta community water supply system in Abay Boreta Woreda, Sidama Region. Selected as a showcase site due to its high vulnerability to flood and contamination risks, the system provides safe water to more than 2,900 people across over 580 households.

During the visit, the project team reviewed flood and contamination risk management interventions including structural improvements designed to safeguard the water source. These include upstream flood diversion structures, rehabilitated headworks and protective fencing to keep animals and surface runoff away.

Beyond physical infrastructure, the team engaged with local water beneficiary committees to discuss sustainable water supply system management and the importance of constructing and utilising household latrines to prevent open defecation and subsequent water contamination. Coordination meetings were also held with the Woreda Office of Water and Office of Agriculture to align local sector efforts for long-term resource protection.

Enhancing Yield and Resilience in Oromia

Following the Sidama mission, the COWASH IV project team traveled to Bereke Woreda in the Oromia Region from August 18 to 19, 2026, to monitor the second WSP showcase site: the Burqa Iresa community water supply system, which serves 222 people across 56 households.



Prior to the COWASH IV intervention, the Burqa Iresa system faced severe challenges, including flood vulnerability, spring yield reduction, lack of perimeter protection, and water contamination at both the source and household levels.

To address these vulnerabilities, the community implemented physical and biological watershed management measures to combat reduced groundwater recharge, alongside flood diversion structures. Active community engagement also drove the construction of household latrines, successfully mitigating contamination risks.

Project reports indicate that these coordinated measures have eliminated flood damage, prevented contamination and measurably increased spring water yield.

Next Steps for Sustainable Management

As Water Safety Plans require continuous monitoring and improvement, local stakeholders and community members at both sites have reaffirmed their commitment to sustaining the gains achieved so far.



Moving forward, the COWASH IV project will continue providing technical support to investigate remaining community-identified challenges, strengthen watershed management and foster integration among water, health and agriculture offices at the Woreda level.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Safe Water for All: Over 1,371,725 rural people now have access to clean water through new and rehabilitated water schemes.

Empowering Communities: 26 WASH businesses launched and 468 WASH Saving and Loan Associations established, fostering sustainable solutions.

Healthy Schools: Improved WASH facilities in 884 schools, benefiting 593,381 students and school staff.

Hygienic Healthcare: 702 health institutions equipped with water points and latrines, creating a healthier environment for patients and staff.

Menstrual Hygiene Management: 124 menstrual hygiene management facilities built, promoting women and girls' health.

MAKING IMPROVED SANITATION AFFORDABLE THROUGH COMMUNITY SAVINGS AND LOCAL MICROFINANCE



In Samien Amobokona village, Central Ethiopia, improving household sanitation has long presented significant financial challenges for rural residents. To address this barrier, COWASH IV, in collaboration with the local community and VisionFund Microfinance Institution, established an alternative financing model.

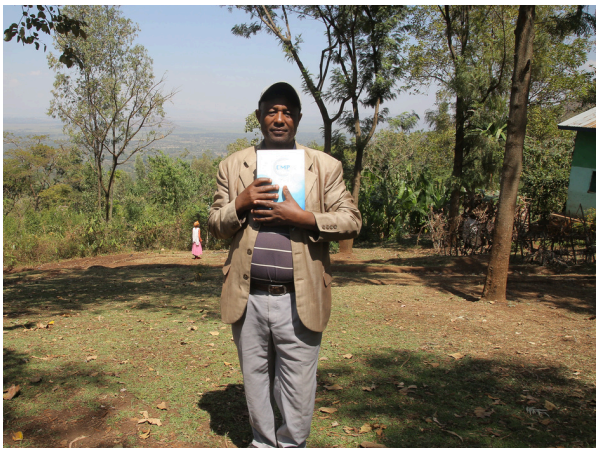
In the Ethiopian Fiscal Year 2017, COWASH IV facilitated the formation of a 26-member Saving and Loan Association (SLA) in the village. The group enables members to save regularly and access financing for improved latrine construction. To enable members to purchase plastic slabs, the initiative integrated a microfinance mechanism with VisionFund. Under this model, an SLA member saves thirty percent of the cost of a plastic slab (ETB1,100/€6) in a VisionFund account. VisionFund pays a local sanitation supply and water scheme maintenance Medium and Small Enterprise directly for the slab, and the member collects and installs it. The remaining loan amount is repaid by the member over the course of one year.

Through this collaborative approach, half of the initial group's households have successfully constructed improved latrines using the plastic slabs. Building beyond Samien Amobokona, the COWASH IV Community-managed Project Approach Advisor and the Woreda Health Office are working with VisionFund to scale the model across additional villages.

This initiative is part of the project's broader national effort. To date, COWASH IV has established more than 400 SLAs across the eight regions where it operates, enabling communities to construct their own improved household latrines. The project facilitates the establishment of these groups and provides the necessary training to ensure their long-term sustainability. Experience shows that once all group members complete the construction of their improved latrines, many groups continue their savings and shift focus to other WASH services, such as bringing tap water to their homes or installing solar power at community water points.

To further strengthen the supply chain, COWASH IV has established 26 MSCs in collaboration with regional governments. These MSCs supply sanitation materials and maintain water schemes. By integrating SLAs with MSCs, COWASH IV is improving access to affordable sanitation materials, ensuring that households can obtain the products needed to construct and maintain improved sanitation facilities. Through this comprehensive approach, COWASH IV is working to ensure long-term sustainability and improved sanitation and hygiene practices.

WHEN SAVINGS MEET DIALOGUE: COWASH'S APPROACH TO LASTING WASH BEHAVIOUR CHANGE



Access to finance can help families invest in improved sanitation facilities, but infrastructure alone does not guarantee healthier behaviours. Recognising this, COWASH IV is linking its Saving and Loan Associations (SLAs) and Community Conversation (CC) groups to support both sanitation investments and the adoption of healthier hygiene practices.

The value of this integrated approach is already becoming clear in Bereke, where community members participating in both initiatives are combining financial planning with regular discussions on sanitation and hygiene. While the SLAs provide households with a practical way to save and access funds for sanitation improvements, the Community Conversation groups create a space for neighbours to reflect on their daily practices, share experiences and encourage positive behaviour change.

According to Ebsa Feyisa, Social and Behaviour Change Specialist at COWASH IV, improvements in water supply and sanitation only achieve their full health benefits when communities adopt the behaviours needed to use and maintain them effectively. By connecting savings groups with structured dialogue, COWASH IV is helping households address both aspects simultaneously.

COWASH SLAs were originally established to support communities in financing improved household sanitation through regular savings. Over time, these groups have also become important platforms for hygiene promotion, with local Health Extension Workers providing sanitation and hygiene education during meetings.

The Community Conversation initiative builds on this foundation by creating regular opportunities for households to discuss practical WASH issues, including handwashing, safe water storage, household sanitation, and menstrual health and hygiene.

A Community Conversation group in Abaye Boreta, Sidama Region, demonstrates what this can achieve. All 30 participating households have completed improved latrine construction, translating discussion into concrete action.





Members have also adopted safer water handling practices, established household handwashing facilities, and engaged in open conversations about menstrual health and hygiene, helping to challenge long-standing social taboos.

Rather than relying on one-way awareness messages, Community Conversation groups encourage participants to identify challenges within their own households and agree on practical actions together. Facilitators often use SLA meetings as an opportunity to guide discussions using COWASH IV flip charts, ensuring that financial planning and behaviour change reinforcement take place side by side. At the same time, discussions remain flexible enough to respond to issues raised by community members themselves.

By linking access to finance with peer learning and community dialogue, COWASH IV is demonstrating that sustainable WASH improvements require more than physical construction.

When households have both the resources to invest and the support to adopt healthier practices, communities are better positioned to achieve lasting improvements in health and well-being

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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