COWASH



GREETINGS

Welcome to the COWASH IV Quarterly Newsletter. This edition covers project key milestones from April to June 2026 highlighting the transition of women into core WASH infrastructure leaders, the impact of localized school sanitation assessments, and the financial models driving household-level changes. It also reviews the project's expanding multi-sectoral partnerships and village-level conversation initiatives that continue to secure long-term, community-owned progress across rural Ethiopia.

WOMEN WHO ARE TURNING THEIR COMMUNITIES' WASH NEEDS INTO A REALITY IN RURAL ETHIOPIA



WASH Infrastructure Recovery in Tigray

Across COWASH IV rural Woredas, a critical shift is taking place: women are transitioning from the primary collectors of water to the primary leaders of its infrastructure. This leadership is proving vital to community resilience, particularly during periods of recovery.

Following the end of the recent two-year conflict in the Tigray region, communities returned home to find severely damaged Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure. Among those returning were Lete Yohannes Zegeye and Komah Fitsum, established leaders within the local WASH committees (WASHCOs), who had been forced to flee their village during the hostilities. Prior to the conflict, COWASH had provided them with leadership and technical training skills that proved vital upon their return.

Stepping forward immediately to guide the recovery process, they coordinated local community members alongside the remobilized COWASH IV team to manage the rapid repair and restoration of local water points.

Lete Yohannes notes that without safe water, the returning community faced a constant threat of waterborne illnesses, which particularly affected children. Komah highlights that fetching water during their displacement and its immediate aftermath required hours of travel along dangerous roads, risking personal safety and disrupting education. Utilizing the leadership skills built through their prior COWASH training, they effectively restored both essential services and community stability.



Keeping Girls in School: Benishangul Gumuz

The resilience demonstrated in Tigray reflects a broader strategy embedded within the COWASH IV framework: positioning women at the forefront of designing, constructing and managing sustainable WASH facilities. This impact extends beyond village community water points and into local schools and health centres.

In the Benishangul Gumuz region, WASHCO leader Zemzem Taesso, built upon her village's success, mobilizing residents to extend WASH facilities to a nearby school.



This initiative ensured that students gained access to a safe water supply, improved latrines and dedicated Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) centres, effectively reducing school absenteeism among girls.

Water Scheme Financial Sustainability: Central Ethiopia

A similar path of long-term administrative leadership is clear in the Lemo Woreda of Central Ethiopia. There, Tigist Tamerat took the role of Chairperson of her community's WASHCO, leading the construction of a new water scheme that eliminated the exhausting daily walks local women previously endured.

Today, her role has evolved from basic oversight to structural management. She currently runs a community-operated tariff and maintenance system designed to ensure the long-term operational and financial sustainability of the infrastructure.



Moving Beyond Quotas to Substantive Governance

To sustain this momentum and ensure women hold substantive decision-making power rather than token representation, COWASH IV utilizes a structured institutional approach. The project actively promotes a target of more than 50% female membership within WASHCOs. In addition, across all community institutions established by the project, including Makret-based Sanitation Supply Centres (MSCs) and WASH Saving and Loan Associations (SLAs), the project ensures that women hold the three core executive roles: Chairperson, Treasurer and Secretary.

To evaluate this transition on the ground, the COWASH IV team conducted a qualitative assessment in Sidama's Wondo Genet and Gorche Woredas at the beginning of April 2026. The evaluation focused on how women's roles in committee leadership are evolving into meaningful governance, capturing lived experiences.

Preliminary field visits revealed encouraging trends. Female leaders are actively presenting views on water governance and resource sharing, demonstrating high institutional confidence. Furthermore, women are consistently engaging in core management discussions, handling operational questions and leading financial decisions regarding community needs. By focusing on systematic skill-building rather than simply meeting quotas, the project supports community-owned WASH facilities built for long-term durability.

Watch the Transformation here: https://l1nq.com/khu9wlk

BEYOND THE NUMBERS: HOW COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTIONS SHAPE COWASH WATER SCHEMES



While development projects frequently measure success by total funding spent and the number of facilities constructed, long-term goals can only be reached through the genuine need, engagement, participation, leadership and ownership of the communities themselves. This is why the COWASH IV project, through its community-managed project (CMP) approach, actively gives primacy to communities as owners, designers, implementers, and administrators of their own WASH infrastructure. By doing so, the project is proving that the true value of infrastructure and its sustainability lie in the unquantified sweat equity of the people using it.

Under the CMP approach, rural communities are not passive recipients of support but play an active partner role by contributing between 15 and 40 percent of the total cost of local water schemes. On the ground, this equity is built through a rigorous system of manual labour, material sourcing, and financial pooling. Because many rural water points are located in terrains completely inaccessible to heavy vehicles, community members frequently transport heavy construction materials over the final miles by hand or through animal traction. Local residents also clear access roads for drilling rigs, excavate deep trenches, lay pipelines and provide round-the-clock security for construction equipment.

To ensure this participation reflects genuine equity rather than symbolic involvement, WASHCOs, alongside local artisans, maintain daily attendance logs. At the conclusion of construction, these logged hours are converted into monetary values based on standard local wage rates, verified by experts during field supervisions, and submitted to Woreda water offices.

Beyond physical labour, communities source and supply essential local building blocks, including sand, river gravel, stones and wood for concrete mixing. The types and volumes of these resources are formally agreed upon during initial project appraisals, inspected upon arrival, and logged into project registers.





Like the labour hours, these materials are valued against local market prices at the project's end to determine the exact community investment. While not strictly mandatory, many communities also choose to pool direct cash resources, which are formally receipted and tracked in final financial reports.

The total community share of ownership is calculated using a precise formula, dividing the combined value of local labour, materials, and cash by the overall cost of the scheme, which includes both the community contributions and the project's direct grant.This converted figure establishes the community as the primary stakeholder, an approach intended to ensure long-term maintenance and institutional resilience.

This focus on local empowerment has directly driven the project to surpass its latest national milestones ahead of schedule. The latest data shows that COWASH IV has now reached 1,214,364 rural residents across the country through the completion of 3,816 new water schemes and the rehabilitation of 925 existing ones.

To safeguard health, communities are also actively implementing 2,396 localized Water Safety Plans.

By empowering communities to design, construct and manage their own infrastructure, COWASH IV is working to contribute in achieving access to universal and sustainable WASH services in rural Ethiopia.

KEY ACHIEVEMENTS

Safe Water for All: Over 1,222,937 rural people now have access to clean water through new and rehabilitated water schemes.

Empowering Communities: 26 WASH businesses launched and 461 WASH Saving and Loan Associations established, fostering sustainable solutions.

Healthy Schools: Improved WASH facilities in 692 schools, benefiting 465,430 students and school staff.

Hygienic Healthcare: 516 health institutions equipped with water points and latrines, creating a healthier environment for patients and staff.

Menstrual Hygiene Management: 79 menstrual hygiene management facilities built, promoting women and girls' health.

TRANSFORMING MHM SERVICES: KEY INSIGHTS FROM COWASH'S LATEST IMPACT ASSESSMENT



For many young girls in rural schools, a natural biological cycle has long been a source of unvoiced anxiety. When a school lacks safe and private spaces, managing menstruation becomes an overwhelming challenge tied to shame, fear of public exposure and sudden dropouts. However, COWASH's newly concluded MHM impact assessment report shows how targeted MHM interventions are shifting this reality, turning spaces of fear into environments of confidence and dignity.

The assessment, conducted between December 2025 and April 2026 by the COWASH IV team, examined girls' daily school experiences across three project regions: Sidama, Central and Oromia. By gathering qualitative evidence from focus group discussions with 56 girls across five distinct sites, the evaluation captured a before and after transformation in how menstruation affects a girl's life at school.

Shifting from Fear to Focus

Before the construction of the MHM centres, schoolgirls who participated in the assessment recalled a time when unexpected menstruation at school inevitably meant leaving class early or staying home entirely. The fear of staining their clothes, a lack of sanitary products and the absence of private spaces to wash left many with no choice but to drop out of their daily lessons.

One girl shared a memory of staining her clothes before a safe space existed. Terrified to move, she waited in humiliation until all other students had left the building before she could walk home. She then had to return to the school at dawn the next morning with water to clean her chair before her peers arrived.

Today, the MHM center has fundamentally changed that reality in her school. With these secure, lockable private spaces now active on school grounds, girls have a dedicated environment where they can wash, rest, access clean sanitary pads and check their clothes in a mirror. This structural security translates directly into mental confidence, allowing girls to return to their classrooms comfortably and continue learning without fear. In fact, across almost all evaluation sites, girls proudly reported that they did not miss a single day of school during their most recent menstrual cycle.





More Than Infrastructure: A Network of Support

The evaluation highlights that the true impact of the MHM centres lies in how they blend physical infrastructure with human support. The presence of the centres has helped shift the school climate, significantly reducing school-level stigma and teasing.
Girls report feeling increasingly comfortable openly discussing their needs and seeking help.

Across all three regions, female teachers have emerged as the primary, most trusted pillars of support, alongside active girls' clubs and peer networks. In Fofa High School in Central Ethiopia, a strong dynamic of peer solidarity has taken root. One student shared how she guided a frightened classmate through her very first period, bringing her directly to the MHM center and connecting her with a supportive teacher for reassurance and supplies. The center has effectively transformed from an isolated facility into a community hub of safety and guidance.

To ensure these spaces remain functional, fully inclusive, and sustainable, upcoming interventions will explicitly target site-specific operational priorities raised directly by the students including improving internal privacy features, such as adding shower curtains. Furthermore, across all regions, the project is actively developing formalized menstrual pain management protocols with local health offices to provide resting comfort options, while expanding community conversations to dismantle lingering misconceptions outside the school gates.

By listening to the lived experiences of the students and matching structural standards with real-time feedback, COWASH IV is ensuring that rural schools remain spaces where girls can learn, grow and lead with their dignity fully intact.

DID YOU KNOW?

Without the availability of WASH facilities, simply providing food or nutritional supplements cannot solve malnutrition on its own. According to UNICEF Ethiopia, an estimated 50 percent of the consequences of undernutrition are caused by environmental factors that include poor hygiene and a lack of access to safe water supply and sanitation facilities. Beyond expanding WASH services, COWASH IV is actively addressing this gap through its strategic partnership with the Max Foundation, focusing directly on integrating WASH services with nutrition and nutrition-sensitive agriculture.

FROM SAVINGS TO SANITATION: THE GROWING IMPACT OF COWASH SAVING AND LOAN ASSOCIATIONS

To expand rural sanitation across COWASH IV Woredas, communities are leveraging local, self-managed finance to overcome a lack of external funding. By partnering with local stakeholders, COWASH IV helps establish community-managed WASH SLAs. These groups fill a critical credit gap, providing households with the reliable local capital they need to independently fund and build their own improved household latrines.

Launched at the close of Ethiopian Fiscal Year (EFY) 2014, this initiative has sparked an accelerating wave of community participation. In total, this mobilization has created 402 operational SLAs, empowering 3,993 households across 49 Woredas to mobilize more than Birr 2.5millio (Euro 13,700) and to independently build their own improved latrines and handwashing facilities.

EFY 2015

The project launched with 47 initial SLAs, resulting in the construction of 353 improved household latrines.

EFY 2016

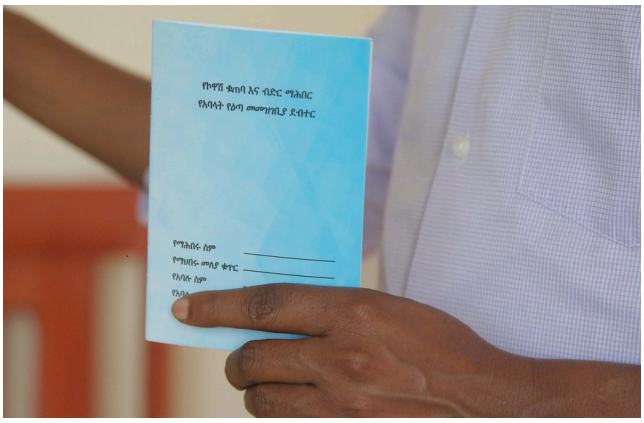
Communities established 84 new associations, completing 423 improved latrines.

EFY 2017:

A major scaling phase saw 163 SLAs formed, driving the construction of 1,411 improved latrines.

EFY 2018 First Half

In just six months, communities formed 108 additional SLAs, delivering another 1,806 improved latrines.



Beyond the Latrine: Post-Construction Evolution

The impact of the SLA model does not stop once a latrine is built. Recognizing the strength of their collective savings, many communities keep their associations active to pursue broader environmental and economic goals.

Today, mature SLAs are expanding their reach in three key ways. A number of mature SLAs have begun funding communal sanitation efforts to elevate entire villages to open-defecation-free status. Other forward-thinking associations are driving green energy transitions by pooling savings to upgrade traditional, diesel-powered water points to sustainable solar-powered systems. Furthermore, several groups are currently undergoing structural evolutions to scale up into formal Rural Saving and Credit Cooperatives, which will allow them to clear the path for larger loans dedicated to macro-level village WASH infrastructure.

COWASH IV support the development of these groups at every stage by providing specialized institutional training, regular follow-up monitoring visits, and by creating vital legal and administrative linkages with relevant local authorities.

COWASH IV AND MAX FOUNDATION REVIEW PROGRESS ON WASH AND NUTRITION INTEGRATION



COWASH IV and the Max Foundation convened their first biannual review meeting on June 8, 2026, to evaluate the progress of their joint partnership aimed at integrating WASH with nutritional initiatives in the Central Ethiopia Region.

Federal officials from the Ministry of Health and the Seqota Declaration team, and local leadership from the pilot site of Fofa Woreda attended the meeting. Sectoral representatives traveling from Fofa included officials from Agriculture, Education, Health, Job Skills Creation and Enterprise, Water, and Women and Children's Affairs, ensuring localized management of the multi-sectoral initiative.

The review highlighted a shift from independent, parallel institutional tracks toward a layered partnership model designed to eliminate duplicated efforts. Project data indicates that community-led management of the combined WASH, nutrition and nutrition-sensitive agriculture frameworks has enhanced the overall efficiency and sustainability of the intervention.

Technical Training and Local Enterprise Establishment

The biannual review follows a technical training programme conducted from April 27 to May 1, 2026, in collaboration with Wolkite Polytechnic College and Satellite Institute. The session focused on the production of liquid soap and reusable sanitary pads.

The primary objective of the training was to build manufacturing skills among members of the newly established Selam Sanitation Enterprise, which was formed in January 2026. It also served to strengthen the supervisory capacity of regional and Woreda-level COWASH personnel. Through the establishment of this local enterprise, the partnership aims to secure a consistent and affordable supply of sanitation products within Fofa Woreda.



This training marks the second major capacity-building milestone for the pilot project. In January 2026, the joint partnership launched its field-level implementation with a comprehensive Training-of-Trainers programme in the Central Ethiopia Region. The initial session included 50 participants, spanning government technical experts, agricultural extension officers, health extension workers, and local enterprise representatives. Following the training session, specific nutrition modules were cascaded directly to community health extension workers.

Ongoing Joint Field Activities

The partnership maintains several standardized health and agricultural interventions across the pilot area, which are carried out by joint teams on a regular basis. At regional health posts, a routine nutrition counseling is being provided focusing on dietary diversification, feeding frequencies and nutritional patterns for pregnant and lactating women, as well as children under two years of age. These sessions are paired with practical cooking demonstrations that show families how to prepare diversified foods and porridge using locally sourced ingredients.

Furthermore, routine child growth monitoring is conducted across five local health posts for children under two years of age, utilizing specialized equipment supplied by the partnership earlier this year. To reinforce these health interventions at the household level, the initiative provides practical agricultural training and extension support, specifically focusing on poultry production and homestead gardening to improve local food security.

Future Outlook and Assessment

Project teams are currently conducting a comprehensive nutrition business assessment. Guided by the strategic framework of the Seqota Declaration, the study is designed to map private-sector engagement, identify systemic constraints and isolate entry points for future development interventions.

Concurrently, the partnership is finalizing the distribution of startup capital for the Selam Sanitation Enterprise, alongside the procurement and delivery of growth monitoring and cooking demonstration equipment for the remaining health posts throughout Fofa Woreda.



COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS DRIVE SANITATION PROGRESS IN OROMIA'S BEREK WOREDA



COWASH IV's Community Conversation (CC) initiative in Berek Woreda, Oromia, has successfully completed its initial cycle of sessions, triggering an increased demand for household sanitation infrastructure across four local kebeles. The initiative, which launched its latest round of village-level discussions in late January 2026, has engaged 103 active participants distributed across four distinct CC groups. The structured sessions provided a collaborative platform for households to discuss localized sanitation and hygiene challenges, share experiences, and plan behavioural changes.

Field Observations and Infrastructure Demand

A field assessment conducted by the COWASH IV team from April 29 to 30, 2026, documented measurable progress among participating households. The evaluation noted that early adopters within the groups have initiated the construction of improved latrines. Furthermore, member households have begun allocating financial resources specifically for upgrading their sanitation and handwashing facilities.

This shift in community attitude has resulted in a direct surge in demand for specialized sanitation products. To address this need, the Woreda Health Office is currently arranging technical training for local masons. The training will focus on the production of concrete slabs and related sanitation technologies required for upgrading household facilities.

Criteria for Graduation and Expansion Plans

Under the initiative's framework, programme graduation is contingent upon meeting specific criteria. Participants must complete all designated conversation sessions and finalize the physical construction of both an improved household latrine and a dedicated handwashing facility.



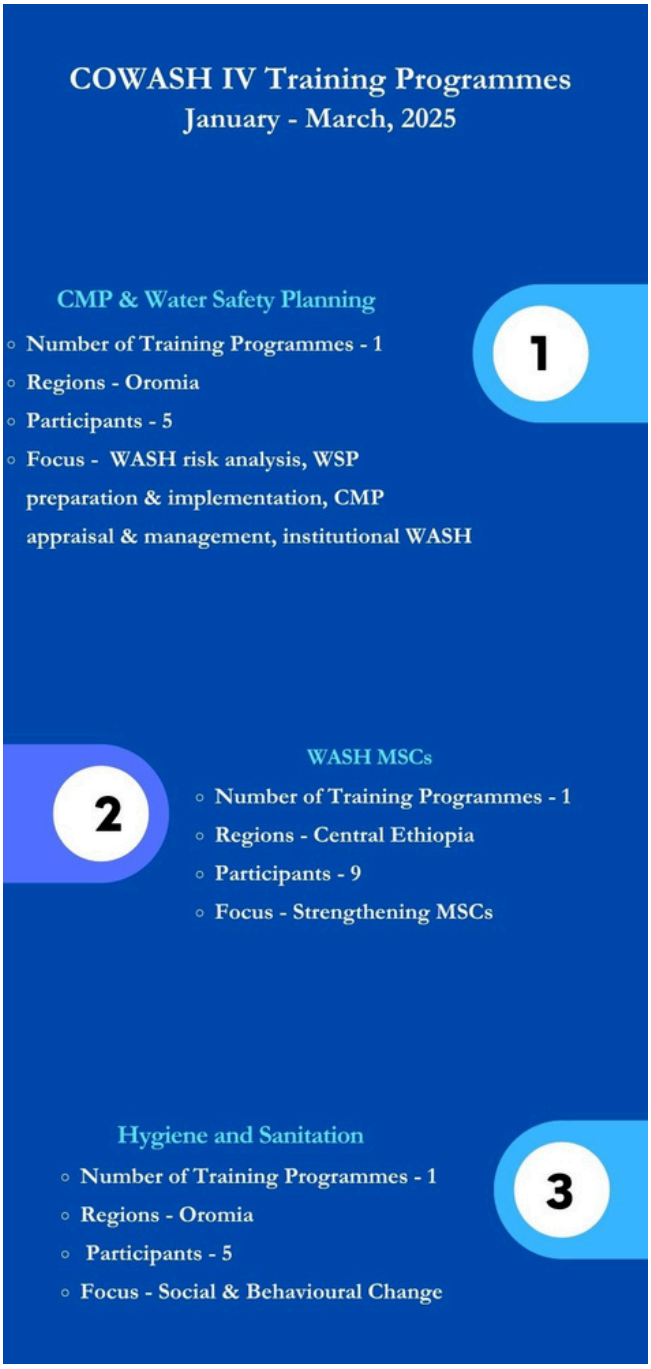
Community members have indicated readiness to begin the construction phase once the necessary building materials and masonry services become locally available.

Following a debriefing session between project coordinators and local authorities, COWASH IV and the Woreda Health Office formally agreed to expand the conversation model to additional villages within the existing four kebeles to broaden the project's reach.

Background and Regional Scope

The current implementation phase is part of a wider strategic rollout that commenced in September 2025 with the training of volunteer facilitators. The initiative progressed to active village-level group discussions by October 2025.

To date, the COWASH IV CC initiative has expanded to encompass 76 active CC groups, engaging a total of 2,280 participants across five project regions. The programme continues to utilize these community-led forums as the primary mechanism for establishing long-term sanitation and hygiene practices at the household level.





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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