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REPORT ON GASTROENTERITIS PREVENTION AWARENESS CAMPAIGN IN PRIMARY SCHOOLS



SUBMITTED TO

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Executive Summary

Neno district reported a gastroenteritis diarrhoeal disease outbreak in August, 2024. The outbreak affected many school going children impacting their education and health. The main areas affected were TA Dambe, TA Cheku-Cheku and Sub TA Chikalema. The main cause of the outbreak was lack of safe water for drinking, inadequate knowledge on the cause and prevention of the disease and poor sanitation and hygiene in households and schools. It was against this background that the Foundation of Girls Education and Health Network (FOGEAHN) conducted the diarrhoeal diseases prevention awareness campaign in the schools where many cases were reported.

The activity took place from 6th to 12th November, 2024 and four schools namely; Namdzanga, Chikonde Model, Nsambe and Kaponda were visited. The project reached a total of 1,873 learners. The activity was supported by the board chair for FOGEAHN, key government line ministries coordinators (Mr Sekanawo Kapira-Gastroenteritis Coordinator) from health and education (Mr Ector Taibu-DEMISO). The other key personnel involved were the Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) Mrs Queen Sagawa for Chikonde Zone and Mr Migoza for Nsambe Zone. The Head Teachers, SHN Teachers and Disease Control Surveillance Assistants (DCSA)/HSAs responsible for the schools also played a key role in this exercise.

The major gaps identified in all the schools were poor sanitation in the toilets, lack of hand washing facilities, lack of drop hole covers, inadequate refuse pits and changing rooms for female learner's during their menstruation periods. The toilet learner's ratio was also very high. The schools had no Madzi (sanitation) Clubs to facilitate WASH issues despite the availability of SHN teachers. Following the gaps identified, the learners were given the awareness (health talks) on the cause, prevention and control of diarrhoeal diseases and FOGEAHN distributed 15 buckets where by Chikonde Model received 4 buckets, Kaponda-4 buckets, Namdzanga-4 buckets and Nsambe-3 buckets) to be used as hand washing facilities. Four female learners were chosen as champions to motivate other girls in the district during FOGEAHN's girl led campaign in the district. There is also a need to roll out Sexual Reproductive Health (Menstrual Hygiene) program in schools as this has been a major challenge in the girl's education.

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List of abbreviations

CSO	Civil Society Organization
DEMISO	District Education Management Information System Officer
DCSA	Disease Control Surveillance Assistant
FOGEAHN	Foundation of Girls Education and Health Network
HSA	Health Surveillance Assistants
MOEST	Ministry of Education Science and Technology
MOH	Ministry of Health and
PEA	Primary Education Advisors
QECH	Queen Elizabeth Central Hospital
SHN	School Health and Nutrition
SRH	Sexual Reproductive Health
TA	Traditional Authority
WASH	Water Hygiene and Sanitation

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Background

Over the past several years, the outbreaks of typhoid fever and other diarrhoeal diseases have been documented in sub-Saharan African nations where access to safe water and sanitation facilities remains limited. Malawi experienced a severe cholera outbreak, with over 36,943 cases and 1,210 deaths reported since March 2022. Diarrhoeal diseases are a significant public health concern in Neno as the district faces various outbreaks.

Between 2009 and 2010 Neno reported typhoid fever outbreak where 748 cases and 44 deaths by September 2010 were recorded. Despite numerous interventions, cases of typhoid fever and cholera continued. Typhoid fever outbreak resurfaced in 2012 and 2020. In 2020, typhoid fever claimed five deaths and 56 suspects with 41 confirmed positive. This year (12th August, 2024), an outbreak of gastroenteritis resulted into three deaths and 399 cases, with 6 confirmed positive.

Following the onsets of outbreaks and after targeted education and prevention interventions by Ministry of Health and partner organizations, household knowledge of the causes and methods of preventing diarrhoeal diseases, adoption of safe water, and sanitation and hygiene practices at the household level has been sub-optimal. There is low chlorine usage and beliefs that the outbreaks are due to an ancestral curse, witchcraft and bad air. Drinking water from unimproved sources, storing water for extended periods put them at high risk for waterborne diseases. There is need for more effective interventions to improve household and public institutions knowledge of disease transmission and prevention, and increase uptake and maintenance of preventive behaviours including regular water treatment and hand washing practices.

1.2 Problem Statement and justification

Neno district reported a gastroenteritis diarrhoeal disease outbreak in August, 2024. The outbreak affected many school going children impacting their education and health. The main areas affected were TA Dambe, TA Cheku-Cheku and Sub TA Chikalema. The main cause of the outbreak was lack of safe water for drinking, inadequate knowledge on the cause and prevention of the diseases and poor sanitation and hygiene in households and schools.

Neno has a population to water point ratio of 1:243. Comparatively TA Dambe where many cases of the outbreak were reported has the highest population to water point ratio of 1:509. Majority of people (78%) in Neno drink water from the boreholes but TA Dambe is exceptional. The area has 13% water source due to its bad terrain and majority of the people drink water from unimproved sources such as the streams, springs, rivers and dams. Additionally, majority of the people in Neno especially in TA Dambe transport water in poor facilities one kilometer down from the rivers,

springs, streams and dams and store their water for extended periods putting them at high risk for waterborne diseases.

It was against this background that the Foundation of Girls Education and Health Network (FOGEAHN) conducted the diarrhoeal diseases prevention awareness campaign in the schools where many cases were reported.

The activity took place from 6th to 12th November, 2024 and all the planned schools were visited. The activity was supported by the board chair, education and health sector representatives including the CSO chair and the media. FOGEAHN distributed 15 buckets (Chikonde Model-4, Kaponda-4, Namdzanga-4 and Nsambe-3) to be used as hand washing facilities. Four female learners were chosen as FOGEAHN champions.

1.3 Objectives

The activity aimed at promoting water, sanitation and hygiene in the selected schools in Neno district. The specific objectives of the activity were:

1. To inspect the school premises to identify the sanitation and hygiene gaps the schools are facing
2. To support the schools with hand washing facilities to promote hand washing practices
3. To sensitize the learners on the cause, prevention and control of diarrhoeal diseases
4. To assess the availability and functionality of the sanitation clubs in the schools
5. To identify the best, bright and model female students which FOGEAHN can use as their champions in the district to motivate other female learners.

2.0 Methodology

The activity involved:

1. Transect walk into the school premises and toilets
2. Health talks on the cause, prevention and control of the disease
3. Group discussion with the learners
4. Demonstrations to the learners on proper hand washing

3.0 Findings

The activity took place from 6th to 12th November, 2024 and four schools namely; Namdzanga, Chikonde Model, Nsambe and Kaponda were visited. The project reached a total of 1,873 learners in all the four mentioned schools above with the highest enrolment being recorded at Chikonde

Model Primary School. The activity was supported by the government line ministries key coordinators from Health (Mr Sekanawo Kapira-Gastroenteritis Coordinator) and education (Mr Ector Taibu-DEMISO). The other key personnel involved were the Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) Mrs Queen Sagawa for Chikonde Zone and Mr Migoza for Nsambe Zone. The Head Teachers, SHN Teachers and Disease Control Surveillance Assistants (DCSA)/Health Surveillance Assistants (HSAs) responsible for the schools also played a key role in this exercise.

3.1 The inspection of schools premises to identify water sanitation and hygiene gaps

The team conducted the inspections in all the schools. All the schools had the clean surroundings. The major gaps identified in all the schools were poor sanitation in all the toilets. There were no hand washing facilities, lack of drop hole covers and inadequate refuse pits. Only one school (Kaponda) had water storage buckets with mugs for drinking unlike the rest of the other schools. Additionally, the schools had no changing rooms for female learner's menstrual hygiene. The toilet learner's ratio was very high and the worse school was Namdzanga with only four functional toilets for the learners and the teachers.



Figure 1: The staff from Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education Science and Technology inspecting the school premises at Namdzanga Primary School on 6th November, 2024.

3.2 Assessment of the availability and functionality of the sanitation clubs in the schools

The schools had no Madzi (Sanitation) clubs to facilitate WASH issues despite the availability of SHN teachers. These very important clubs were not known even in some schools. As an action point, FOGEAHN together with MoEST and MoH will facilitate the formation of these clubs. The

clubs will make sure that the school premises are swept, mopped and the furniture is dusted. They will also make sure that the toilets are cleaned, mopped and the hand washing facilities are filled with clean water to promote hand washing practices after visiting the toilets. The clubs will also make sure that the water sources are clean, water for drinking is treated with chlorine and mugs are available to be used especially following the two cups system.



Figure 2: Disease Control and Surveillance Assistant (Mr Samuel Dancan) hinting on the need to strengthen sanitation through sanitation clubs at Namdzanga Primary School on 6th November, 2024.

3.3 Sensitization of the learners on the cause, prevention and control of diarrhoeal diseases

Following on the gaps identified, Mr Sekanawo Kapira the Gastroenteritis Coordinator for the Ministry of Health at Neno District Office conducted the awareness campaigns by giving the health talks and brainstorming on the cause, prevention and control of diarrhoeal diseases. He had been encouraging the learners to avoid open defecation but rather use toilets, wash hands in all the five critical times (after using the toilet, after touching the child’s bottom/exchanging nappies, before eating, before and after preparing food and after cleaning the environment), drink safe water which has only been treated with chlorine, cleaning the toilets and the surroundings and washing their clothes frequently. He warned them to avoid eating fruits before washing especially in this rainy season where mangoes are easily found which contributes to cholera and other related diarrhoeal diseases outbreaks. The learners were also advised to construct locally made hand washing facilities (mponda giya) in their respective homes and cascade the knowledge gained from this campaign to their fellow family members.



Figure 3: Sekanawo Kapira giving a health talk on gastroenteritis cause, prevention and control



Figure 4: A learner at Kaponda Primary School demonstrating the proper hand washing to his fellow students.

Robert Manda, the Project Coordinator for FOGAHN had also been helping the learners demonstrate the proper hand washing practices. Mr Ector Taibu the DEMISO and Mrs Queen Sagawa the PEA encouraged the learners to practice hygienic life to prevent the disease using the

moto “Ine ndi dolo sindinyera kutchire”. The board chair Mr David Masea reminded the learners that they are the future leaders hence the need to live a health life to achieve their full potential.



Figure 5: The board chair Mr David Masea giving motivational talk to the learners at Chikonde Model Primary School on 7th November, 2024.

3.4 Distribution of hand washing facilities

Following the challenges of poor sanitation identified in schools above, FOGEAHN supported the schools with hand washing facilities to promote hand washing practices, safe water storage and transportation. The buckets were distributed to the school authorities who were also encouraged to form the sanitation clubs which will be responsible for WASH issues in schools. A total of 15 buckets were distributed as follows: Kaponda received 4, Namdzanga-4 buckets, Chikonde Model 4 and Nsambe 3.



Figure 6: Robert Manda (FOGEAHN Project Coordinator) passing the bucket to the PEA (Mrs Queen Sagawa) to be handed over to Namdzanga Primary School staff and students on 6th November, 2024.

The Head Teachers, PEAs and SHN Teachers commended the good initiative FOGEAHN had made because it will reduce the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases in the schools by promoting hand washing practices among the learners. However, they requested FOGEAHN and other CSOs to help them with more hand washing facilities since four buckets per school were not adequate to serve all the learners.



Figure 7: The DEMISO (Mr Ector Taibu) from the DEM's district office and Head Teacher for Nsambe Primary School passing the buckets to his learners donated by FOGAHN on 11th November, 2024.

3.5 Identification of girl led champions

In fulfillment of the girl led campaign and empowerment, FOGAHN identified the best, bright and model female students to be used as the champions in the district. These were the girls who managed to be the most outstanding learners and were on first positions in the previous term in their respective classes. Namdzanga had one female student and Chikonde Model had 4 female students.



Figure 8: The PEA (Queen Sagawa), DEMISO (Ector Taibu), Project Coordinator (Robert Manda), CSO Chair (Russell Msiska), Board Chairperson (David Maseya), DSCA/HSA (Chisomo Glyn) and four female most intelligent students chosen as FOGAHN champions.

These students were awarded with MK4,000.00 each to buy soap. This initiative aimed to motivate other female learners that they can also lead in some activities and do better in life than men. The project aims to support these children up to university level when the funding permits. Despite the identification of these girls, menstrual hygiene was one major challenge these female learners met. They lacked SRH knowledge and support. They would like to be oriented on SRH, supported with recycled menstrual pads, enough change rooms, soap and stationery to advance with their education to achieve their full potential.



Figure 9: The identified FOGEAHN champions' girls from Chikonde Model Primary School to lead the girl led campaign

4.0 Successes

The following successes were made during the field visits:

1. The government officials, media and CSO members supported the event
2. 15 buckets were distributed in schools which will be used as hand washing facilities
3. The program was implemented despite fuel, internet and power challenges
4. The 5 female champions were identified and the project will use them to motivate other learners during its girl child led campaign
5. The activity had scaled up FOGEAHN's impact area and visibility from one TA (Chekucheku) to 3 TAs (Dambe and Chikalema)
6. The awareness campaign had promoted water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) in schools

5.0 Challenges

Despite, several successes made, some challenges were encountered during the program field visit. The challenges were:

1. Fuel crisis which delayed the activity
2. Disaster which resulted into power, water and internet loss delaying the implementation as well
3. Inadequate buckets to cater the learners' buckets ratio in schools. Other schools have big enrolment
4. Lunch allowances were not adequate to cover all the responsible officers who took part in the event.
5. Lack of reliable transport. The hospital was using their vehicles for some other key duties such as transporting the referral patients to QECH.
6. Poor sanitation in schools
7. Lack of sanitation clubs in schools to facilitate health and preventive issues
8. Lack of SRH (menstrual hygiene) programs in schools
9. Lack of change rooms for girls during the menstrual periods

6.0 Recommendations

The following recommendations should go to FOGEAHN, CSOs and the government:

1. There is need to lobby more funds to procure more buckets for water storage, transportation and hand washing to promote WASH in the schools
2. The lunch allowances should be increased. This has been FOGEAHN's learning forum and hopes to improve in the next activities
3. There is need to be booking more vehicles from different sectors in case one fails or else use the motorbikes. It is very difficult to control the ambulances since they serve a great duty to save human kind.
4. The CSO, government and FOGEAHN should continue with WASH interventions in schools
5. There is need to facilitate the formation of sanitation clubs and orientation of the members on their roles.
6. FOGEAHN should roll out menstrual hygiene program in schools with very little resources to open the doors for the funding from other potential donors.
7. There is need to construct change rooms to promote menstrual hygiene in primary and secondary schools.
8. Facilitation of construction of more toilets in the schools to reduce high learners and toilet ratio.

7.0 Conclusion

The gastroenteritis prevention awareness campaign in the primary schools was successfully conducted. However, the disaster which led to network and power loss including the national fuel crisis delayed the implementation. The schools had poor sanitation and knowledge level on the cause, prevention and control of diarrhoeal related diseases was low. The number of toilets against the learners was very low and the schools had no sanitation clubs. In response to the challenges identified in the schools, FOGEAHN in collaboration with Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education Science and Technology in district conducted the awareness campaign and distributed 15 buckets in the schools to promote WASH. However, the support was not enough and the organization including some other CSO members and the government should lobby funding to procure more sanitary facilities in the schools to promote water hygiene and sanitation (WASH) in schools. FOGEAHN should facilitate the formation of sanitation clubs roll out menstrual hygiene program in schools with whatever very little resources to open up the doors for the funding from other potential donors who are willing to support the SRH program in the district.

Thanks.

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