HOMA BAY

SANITATION: Local NGO in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health initiates the School Led Total (SLAT) sanitation programme which aims at encouraging the community to construct latrines.

Latrine use drive bears fruit

By KENAN MIRUKA

Clad in green uniform, the young boys and girls gesticulate as they confidently recite a poem to an audience comprising pupils and guests.

The audience applauds amid laughter as the young poets recite, The Big Squat' dramatizing proper use of latrines. Mixed reactions greet the presentation of the poem with some covering their faces in 'shame' while others openly laugh. The message is passed.

The young poets are members of the Health Club at Arujo primary school in Homa Bay County. They are part of a successful School Led Total Sanitation programme that has led the way in attitude change among community members towards improving sanitation standards.

Hand washing

Situated 3km from Homa Bay town, the school has a population of 250 pupils, 190 boys and 100 girls. The school boasts of ample and modern water and sanitation facilities constructed as part of Plan Kenya’s activities since 2007.

The school’s management committee chairman Ouma Omollo says until 2008, when the last cholera-related death was reported in Homabay County, defecation in open places was the norm rather than the exception.

“Access to clean water was a problem and open defecation was normal leading to the spread of diseases like dysentery, diarrhoea and the killer cholera. It is now over four years since the last case of a cholera-related death was reported in this village and the foul smell that permeated the air is gone,” says Omollo.

According to the school’s head teacher, Christine Ogwe, absenteeism was common among pupils who complained of stomach pain and diarrhoea particularly in lower primary.

“Initially, we had only two toilets in the school. Children found it hard to differentiate between boys and girls’ latrines and some sneaked into nearby bushes to relieve themselves. But now they have it right,” she says.

She says the school has hand washing facilities for pupils who have learnt to appreciate the importance of sanitation.

“Children have a big impact in disseminating information. Most homes now have latrines as a result of the messages relayed to parents. We talk to children during the morning assembly and in class about the disadvantages of open defecation. We have a 42-member health club that helps in sensitisation,” explains club patron Mrs Migooda.

Redempta Atieno, a Class Seven pupil at the school and member of the health club, says they meet thrice a week to learn and rehearse poems and songs that promote sanitation. “We have learnt the need to wash our hands, clean latrines and boreholes in several other schools as well as installing hand-wash facilities at Nkoroi and Arujo primary schools in Homa Bay County.

SCHOOL LED TOTAL SANITATION PROGRAMME

Jointed by cholera-related deaths in 2008, the Ministry of Public Health came together to start the SLTS programme in Arujo so as to sensitise the community on the importance of having pit latrines in their homes, the dangers of open defecation and the importance of washing hands properly after visiting the latrine. The programme has helped build several latrines and boreholes in several other schools as well as installing hand-wash facilities at Nkoroi and Arujo primary schools in Homa Bay County.

FROM TOP: Members of the Health Club from Arujo Primary School demonstrate how to wash hands after visiting a latrine; They recite a poem titled “The big squat” which emphasises on the proper use of pit latrines. BELOW: Sammy Kemboi and Joyce Adhiambo move a clean water dispenser in the school grounds. [PHOTOS: KENAN MIRUKA]

Cat method

Using poems and skits, the health club helps sensitise the rest of school including parents on the Led Total Sanitation (SLTS) programme.

Under SLTS, school children are trained to be peer educators who disseminate messages to the community with an aim of eliminating open defecation thus reducing diarrheal diseases and ultimately child mortality.

“We recite poems and sing songs about sanitation. We realised it is shameful to defecate in the open and before, many children used to miss school with stomach complaints but now it is different,” says Atieno.

“Before, we used the cat method where you dig up a hole, dispose of your feces and cover it up with soil as we didn’t have a latrine. Flies were all over the place, in the house and on utensils. It was really bad,” narrates Atieno.

After learning about the health risks associated with open defecation, Atieno relayed the information to his father and although she was dismissed at first, she is glad they finally built a latrine last year.

The school Health Club was started by Plan Kenya in collaboration with community based resource persons and the ministry of public health. The pupils in turn sensitised the entire school and immediately started building rapport with the community.

They mapped out all the defecation sites within the school and community environment before coming up with sounds to use whenever they spotted anyone defecating in the open.

Pit latrines

“It was fun during the initial stages as we were asked to say if we had latrines at home. This made most of the pupils embarrassed and they went ahead and told their parents to construct latrines,” recalls John Oiteme, a pupil.

Within a period of one month, there was a significant improvement with 80 per cent of the community members having constructed latrines.

The NGO has built latrines and boreholes in several schools and installed hand washing facilities at Nkoroi and Arujo primary schools.