Washing Up - and Saving Lives by the Millions

Today, around 2.6 billion people still lack access to decent sanitation (aka toilets). One billion people defecate in the open, if that can be imagined in the 21st century. As a result, kids by the millions die each year of water-borne diseases causing diarrhea as human waste commingles with the water supply. Similarly, lack of decent hygiene causes pneumonia, another major killer of children under five. At the start of the new millennium, world leaders promised to cut by half the proportion of people without decent sanitation, and to reduce child mortality by two thirds, all by 2015. We’re determined to help the world keep its promises.

Ho-hum, will say the cynics. More empty promises. In discouraging moments, we sometimes feel the same way. But the evidence is actually to the contrary: promises and goals can make a difference. The numbers of young children dying each year is actually falling, and falling fast, because the world is stepping up the fight for good health. In 1990, 12.5 million kids under five died, almost all of preventable or treatable diseases -- in other words for stupid and unnecessary reasons. By 2010, the number of deaths had declined to 7.6 million. Yes, we agree, 7.6 million is still far too many. Nonetheless there is progress, and realistic hope for much more!

Improved hygiene and sanitation must play a key role in the next stage. The benefits can be enormous, much bigger than is typically realized. After all, diarrhea and pneumonia are the two leading killers of children, accounting for almost 30% of under-five deaths globally, that is, more than two million lives lost each year! Nearly 90% of those tragic and unnecessary deaths of young children occur in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. Vaccines can help, but improved hygiene and sanitation are also vital, and therefore key to meeting the Millennium Development Goal of cutting the child mortality rate by at least two-thirds by 2015.

There are several ways to reduce the incidence of diarrhoea and pneumonia: access to safe water, sanitation (toilets), and personal hygiene, notably hand-washing with soap. They all count; they all save lives; and they should all become absolutely routine in a world that can explore Mars, connect 6 billion mobile subscribers, and unravel the mysteries of the human genome. Yet WASH - 

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene -- involve human systems not just technological ones. We have to make our human systems work better!

Of all of the parts of WASH, fittingly, it is hand-washing with soap that is the single most cost-effective part, indeed one of the greatest health bargains on the planet. The great 19th century doctor Ignaz Semmelweis taught medical professions that their failure to scrub their hands between patients was actually infecting -- and killing -- the mothers under their care for child birth. The doctors pooh-poohed his advice, literally driving him to despair. 150 years later we have absolutely no excuse. The science, the logic, and the century-plus of experience are overwhelming: washing our hands helps keep our loved ones and ourselves alive!

The impacts of hand washing go far beyond health. New studies suggest that hand washing promotion in schools can play a role in reducing absenteeism among primary school children. In China, Colombia and Egypt primary school absenteeism due to diarrhea or and respiratory infections dropped between 20% and 50% as a result of better hand washing practices. Of course separate and safe toilets for schoolgirls help with the number of girls attending schools.

All of these reasons explain why we are proud to announce today that Unilever, its famed Lifebuoy soap brand, and the Millennium Villages Project will join forces to promote hand-washing, and WASH more generally, throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, starting in the 10 Millennium Village clusters that stretch from Senegal in West Africa clear across the continent to Ethiopia in the East and Malawi in the South. We’ll encourage hand washing with soap, household latrines and safe water sources, to improve the lives of the 500,000 people in the Millennium Villages, with advocacy for these interventions for the roughly 500 million people in rural sub-Saharan Africa.

The Millennium Villages Project is demonstrating how to fight poverty, hunger and disease using low-cost, highly effective technologies, from the basics of hand washing to the latest in information technology. The partnership with Unilever’s Lifebuoy will provide an opportunity to better understand how to promote hand washing as part of an integrated approach to fighting disease and poverty in places where such efforts are vitally needed, where more than 1 in 10 children still die before their fifth birthday. The partnership aims to decrease the incidence of diarrhoeal diseases, increase school attendance, and enhance productivity and wellbeing for all community members by reducing the incidence of water-borne diseases and pneumonia.

Private companies like Unilever have a unique and indispensable role to play in promoting public health. Unilever touches the lives of literally billions of people around the planet through its consumer goods and its role in global markets. Unilever has therefore made a very bold commitment in its Sustainable Living Plan: to help at least one billion people improve their hygiene habits by 2020.
For a company like Unilever, proud of its reputation, a commitment is a real bottom line. Fortunately, the company's bold commitment is also matched by expertise, distribution networks and management acumen to reach vast numbers of people and help them improve their lives. The partnership of Unilever and the Millennium Villages Project will be an important step on the road to success.

When it comes to improving health, the best practices and procedures are well known. The operational challenge is to scale up these life-saving approaches that work. The partnership of Unilever and the Millennium Villages offers the opportunity to gain new insights into behavior-change education in low-income communities, so that we can help these communities, the national governments, and development practitioners to accelerate global progress in hygiene and public health throughout the world.

Everybody can help a child. With a pledge on www.facebook.com/lifebuoy Lifebuoy and its partners will help more children receive hygiene education through their dedicated handwashing behavior change programs.

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