



Working with Women's' Groups and Children in Wilgodapura for Hygiene and Environmental Sanitation

WASPA Asia aims to involve a wide range of stakeholders in developing and testing solutions for sanitation and decentralized wastewater management, and mitigation of health risks from wastewater use in agriculture.

Wilgodapura is urban low income community, living in a congested land close to Kurunegala city. Most of the residents are informal dwellers and they also have inadequate access to basic water and sanitation facilities.

2007 April

At the Visioning and PAP development workshop, the Wilgodapura community was identified as one of the main contributors to the pollution of the canals. Therefore, a vision and many related activities were identified to address and upgrade their current sanitation and hygiene behavior.

Along with the formation of the Wilgodapura VAC (Village Action Committee) it was suggested to develop women's and children's groups. This was to achieve the two fold objectives of creating awareness and developing good hygiene practices among women of Wilgodapura, and to tap into the hygiene behavioral practices of the children through the mothers.



It was observed that although there are many unemployed women at home, they were reluctant to attend formal meetings, including those held by their CBO. As for those few who did participate, they were not involved in decision making. Furthermore, it was noticed that their free times to participate in activities such as large gatherings also vary due to their household activities.

Female project staff members were admitted to create smaller Women's' groups but due to the frequent staff changes of the project team, the meetings of these groups were not consistent.

2008 January

As previous meetings did not prove to be successful, a handful of small groups consisting of 5 to 8 women were organized based on convenience of meeting. These 'courtyard meetings' are informal in nature and the groups meet on weekly basis during a given day and a time. The women who gather are generally neighbors of each other and most of the time relatives of each other as well. Apart from the informal manner, meeting in their compounds has created an enabling atmosphere to communicate freely.

All these meetings were conducted with the presence of the female staff members of the WASPA team. These informal discussion sessions are made use to transfer knowledge to improve their existing hygiene practices, clarify their doubts and to be aware of specific problems that they face due to lack of proper sanitary education and facilities.

In the initial discussions members of the women's groups expressed that they are aware of basic good practices such as hand washing, cleanliness of the kitchen and the toilets where hygienic practices are concerned. But, it was apparent to the project team that although they claim so, some families do not practice hygiene behavior in their everyday life.

The project team also made use of these meetings to assess the knowledge level of these women, learning that although ill-literate some of them had the understanding and the need for social development.



These discussions also revealed their lack of basic sanitary facilities, such as properly constructed latrines and the need for a better enclosed place for bathing and washing. At the same time they expressed the difficulties faced when fetching water from the taps and wells, the problem of wastewater as there is no sewage system. The existing practices related to those issues along with what can be done in the future to address such issues were also discussed. These discussions also revealed that there are a lot of disturbances caused at night by drunkards in Wilgodapura and at times women have to do the pervasive job of cleaning and disinfecting the area around their houses as unknown people have defected openly in their compounds the previous night.

Although the project team tried to rouse them to take action about this kind of behavior they expressed that they do not know who does these acts as they do not come out of their houses at night. Moreover it was said that although one can advise their own people (meaning their family members and close relatives) they cannot advise others as it will cause conflicts.



Meanwhile, attempts were being made to gather the children of Wilgodapura to form a society so that the Hygiene and sanitation related messages can be disseminated from there.

The children of Wilgoda are not school children as most of them left school at an early age. The boys often engage in illegal activities and girls are more

interested in getting married. Therefore they are not particularly interested in education about sanitation and even the few senior students who continue schooling are not willing to join in educational sessions.

The project team was however able to hold a sanitation program for them through a short story on open defecation. The participation was satisfactory and most children who participated were between the ages of six to ten years. Although it proved difficult to control them, they responded to the questions asked by the senior project officer quite well showing that most of them had some knowledge on hygiene related behavior. The story, which was based on their own background, made them feel slightly embarrassed and they responded by laughing.

To enhance the sustainability of the initiatives undertaken by WASPA steps were taken to form a children's society in Wilgoda. For this the project team extended personal invitations to the children to attend the first meeting to form the society.



The children who participated were in school and among them there were ten older children who seemed to be responsible and active, so they were appointed as officers of the organization. The inaugural meeting was brought to an end after a few songs were sung by some of the participants. It was decided that this society would gather every Thursday.

The appointed leaders proved to be very resourceful and encouraging in gathering and controlling children for meetings. On their third meeting they played a hygiene game with the project team. The game was based on a train and stations. There were five stations named: teeth station; face station; nails station; and hair station, where every passenger was checked by the station masters before proceeding to the next station. The

station master provided each passenger with a piece of card at every station; a green card for a good condition; a blue card for a normal condition; and a red card for a bad condition. Finally the passengers counted how many of each card they had received and the project team advised them on the value of these cards and that everybody should try to acquire green cards next time.



In order to enhance their leadership skills and talents, the project team invited the children to present songs and dramas. Through this most children lost their initial fears of presenting in front of an audience. The appointed officers of the society were also instructed as to how to behave and address the members. In later meetings their knowledge level on good hygiene practices was tested and all of them, except for a few smaller children, demonstrated that they are well aware of hygiene practices but they admitted that they rarely follow them.

2008 June

The project team now experiences that the women are voicing themselves better than initial days. At the same time it was observed that there are women of different learning levels, where different health educational sessions should be conducted. The project team also found that even now there are some houses that are preserving hygienic practices up to an expected level. Those who are paying less attention were noted down to be approached separately and be made aware as soon as possible.

The project Team also organized a round of household visits to the members of the women's groups to evaluate their house keeping practices.

Another activity was organized with the women's groups using a cards pack of cartoons on hygiene

practices. By using picture cards the project team was able to engage the women with low literacy and those who are unable to read. It also enabled the team to understand the women's current level of knowledge and attitude regarding sanitation and hygiene. An equal number of cards were divided among group members and they were asked to describe the cartoon pictures, to categorize them as good or bad hygiene practices and to describe the cause and potential effects of it.

With the purpose of improving the livelihood of the women the project team first suggested to introduce home gardening which was immediately put aside by the women's group complaining on the lack of space and the difficulty of safe guarding even a chili plant from children and thieves. Therefore when the possibility of making artificial flowers to be sold to a merchant through a forward contact was brought up, some of the women gave enthusiastic responses. But later, they decided that it was not suitable for them as they don't have time, despite much convincing that was done from the project team.

Most mothers have also expressed that they wish to have a better future for their children. The project team members stress on the fact that they need to be vigilant with children and their education as their social status can be improved and developed through their own children. In order to provide the children with a better environment to continue their education it is vital to pay attention to their cleanliness and hygiene.



These gatherings do have their own difficulties, especially when some of the participants fail to attend the meetings regularly. There are many interruptions from those who pass by and their

family members, but it is welcoming to see that most of them do show an interest in taking part.

Moreover the project team has identified a scattered group of young women who do not participate for any of the gatherings. This group primarily consists of young mothers with infants that make them a prime sample that needs hygiene and sanitation awareness and assistance.

It was distressing to find out that a few elder males still defecate openly to the canal even after providing them with a new set of communal latrines. The women who gather for the meetings insisted that their family members use latrines. But they also complained that there are smaller children who are guided by mothers to defecate openly as they are not brought to toilets or children don't like to go to toilets. Therefore the project team instructed the groups to make use small plastic commodes or bowls to be used to collect the excreta infants and small children which can be dumped into a latrine and flushed. They were also advised to keep these commodes or bowls clean as the children can contract diseases by using unhygienic commodes.

A story book on using sanitation facilities was printed and distributed among the children of Wilgoda which contained text in both sinhala and tamil languages. It was observed that children are interested in doing activities that are enjoyable such as games rather than listening to a speech on good hygiene practices.



Two MOH officers and the CPHI of the Kurunegala Municipal Council conducted a health and hygiene session to all the women's groups on 27th August 2008. This is to be followed up by 2 more sessions conducted by the MOH and PHI officers on hygiene education and sanitation behavior.

Further activities such as Video Shows for Children & Mothers have been planned to improve the practices of hygiene & environmental sanitation of Wilgodapura community along with capacity building training programmers for children's leaders.

2008 September

Wilgodapura Children's Society, together with WASPA Project officers celebrated the Global Hand Washing Day on the 15th of October 2008.



16 members of the Children's society together with two project officers from WASPA conducted the Well-Washer game with pocket voting. The children poll their vote secretly and privately to the statement "Today I washed my hands with soap before my lunch".

The children also voiced their concern on common hygiene issues that are faced by their community and how they can help to improve the situation by practicing good hygiene behavior and sanitation practices. The children were able to highlight, the importance of hand washing, how diseases can be prevented through hand washing and what are the occasions that hand washing needs to be practiced. This also led to the identification of poor hygiene habits in their households.

The children were given a booklet of basic hygiene in the end of the program.

WASPA team has made several attempts to involve the women, in livelihood development activities such as home gardening which has been rejected. But without being discouraged by their lack of interest the team introduced a new concept called "The Green House Concept", which will eventually be a competition among the residents. The rules that were laid for this competition were simple and straight forward. Through the women's groups the Wilgodapura families were informed that standard hygiene and sanitation practices and home gardening will be the key to make their houses a Green House. The houses should be environment friendly and household members also should practice good hygiene behavior. New

methods of home gardening that suits the confined and small places will be introduced to them as well. All households will be observed on these aspects and by December, the house that has the best sanitation practices as well as the best home gardening will be awarded a plaque.

On 21st October the AIs of the Agrarian Services Centre Mr. Wijesinghebandara, Miss Ganga Warnakulasooriya and Mr.Jayasundara together with a group of 15 women conducted an onsite demonstration on home gardening methods in Wilgodawatte.



In addition to the activities conducted in the community of Wilgodapura, the WASPA team also developed a liaison with the Hindu College; the school attended by the Tamil and Islamic children from the Wilgodapura community. As an education institute the school plays an important role in developing the character of a child and therefore the team thought it is best that hygiene, environmental sanitation and waste management practices be further introduced via school will be more influential. The wilgod hindu college is also one of the smaller schools in Kurunegala, that is not a recipients of preferential treatment; hence lacks many resources as well.



The principal of the school Mr.Sendil Savinganam extended an invitation to the project team to conduct a seminar on good hygiene and sanitation behaviour due to the reputation gained by working with the wilgodapura community. Before conducting the seminar the project team members together with the teacher in charge of Agriculture and Environmental issues of the school, first conducted a discussion on what they expect to achieve from the seminar and their current issues which was followed by the filed visit of the school premises. The visit was made use to identify appropriate places for compost bins, notices, hygiene messages etc to be placed.



On 21st of November, the school was provided with plastic waste bins for each class after a brief explanation of what type of waste should be put in to the plastic bin. The responsibility of the Keeping of bin given to the class monitor under the supervision of the class teacher. Separate bins of larger size were also placed in selected spots on the school premises for the disposal of organic and inorganic waste collected within the schools.

Large wall hangers with Hygiene messages were also printed by WASPA to be hung near the toilets, and also in each classroom. Next a general assembly was called by the Principal of the school, and a brief seminar on awareness on Hygiene and sanitation as well as safe disposal of waste was conducted by him using the Large Posters with messages in Tamil which were done by WASPA. The programme received enthusiastic responses from the children and the teachers.

The WASPA team also observed that the decayed status of their water taps and undertook to renovate the taps with a much more child friendly design.



As a community that requires much support from other stakeholders, it is the wish of the Project team, that they will continue to act as pressure groups to relevant authorities to fulfill their basic rights.

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The members of the Wilgodaoura Children's Environment Society also received a basic first aid training from the Staff of the Kurunegala General Hospital on 19th December 2008. This proved to be an educational as well as an enjoyable session to the children where they received trainings on CPR techniques, Bandaging etc.



Conclusion

The Community of Wilgodapura has long suffered the alienation of the majority due reasons of low income, occupation and illiteracy. Through WASPA, most of them were able to change their lives for better even in small sense. Their improvement in hygiene and sanitation alone has created much impact not only on themselves but also other stakeholders of the project. The enthusiasm of the families to be "better-off" is encouraging.

