

**Hajra
Mukasa**



Why we must invest in hand-washing promotion

Uganda recently joined the world to celebrate Global Handwashing Day. It is celebrated annually on October 15.

It is an annual global advocacy day dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding about the importance of handwashing with soap as an easy, effective and affordable way to prevent diseases and save lives. In Uganda, about 80% of the disease burden is sanitation related and yet just up to 10% of the primary health care budget is allocated to sanitation promotion activities in a local government. For a strategy that requires continuous reminder to influence people's behaviour, which in most cases is cultural, the 10% can only do so much. According to the Ministry of Water and Environment sector performance report of 2017, Uganda is still registering only 37% and 35% hand washing coverage for the urban and rural settings respectively.

The Centre for Disease Control has established that washing hands with soap and clean water is one of the most important steps to avoid getting sick and spreading germs to others. Studies have shown that hand washing with clean water and soap could reduce diarrhoea risk by 47%-58%. It also reduces the risks of severe intestinal infections by 48% and respiratory illnesses, like colds, in the general population by 16-21%. Given that diarrhoea and pneumonia are among the top five burden of disease and cause of mortality among children below five years of age, it, therefore, means that promoting hand-washing could save a million lives in Uganda and save the country millions of shillings spent on drugs to treat such conditions.

Faeces from people or animals is an important source of germs that cause diarrhoeal infections. A single gram of human faeces, which is about the weight of a paper clip, can contain one trillion germs. However, these germs must be eaten or drunk through fresh faeces in food or fluids to cause disease. Important to remember also is that hand-shaking is way of greeting in most parts of the world including Uganda.

In addition, people frequently touch their eyes, nose and mouth without realising it. This makes it easy for germs to move from one person to another.

It is not uncommon to find fecal matter on walls of public toilets and latrines at such heights that make it obvious that it could only have got there by someone's hands. These people who smear the fecal matter on the walls will also touch the same toilet door as they get out of the toilet and will touch surfaces such as tables, chairs, taxi seats, cups among many other objects that the persons who did not touch the faeces directly will touch.

Unfortunately, this is not so obvious so one will not see it with their naked eye. This, therefore, means that we get to touch into fecal matter most of the time.

However, given that only 35% of Ugandans are reported to be practicing hand-washing during critical moments which include before eating, coupled by our culture of greeting through a handshake, your guess is as good as mine on whether people could be ingesting each other's faeces. Antibiotics often are prescribed unnecessarily for these health issues.

Therefore, preventing these infections by hand-washing would reduce the amount/overuse of antibiotics and the likelihood that antibiotic resistance will develop. Hand-washing can also prevent people from getting sick with germs that are already resistant to antibiotics. If hand washing with water and soap can reduce the risk of acute respiratory tract infections by 21% and diarrhoeal disease by almost half, it may represent a feasible option for Uganda to invest in hand-washing given that diarrhoea and pneumonia are among the top five causes of morbidity and mortality and yet only 35% of Ugandans are reported to be practicing hand washing.

One may argue that soap may not be readily available most of the times, especially in the rural settings. However, there are very many alternatives such as ash and herbal leaves that people have been using even before soap was ever known to clean surfaces, including their bodies. Small-scale studies have shown that improving hand washing is possible, especially if children are used as change agents, when hand-washing stations are made available to act as reminders and when hand-washing promotion becomes everyone's business!

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