

## **EDUCATING COMMUNITIES ON CRITICAL MOMENTS OF HAND WASHING**

Poor sanitation and hygiene is a cross-cutting health concern in Ethiopia. Poor sanitation leads to diarrheal diseases, which is responsible for 22% of all deaths of children under five (UNICEF). Poor personal and household hygiene can lead to trachoma, increased rate of infections, and a number of other diseases.

Ethiopia is on track to achieve the Millennium Development Goal target related to water, where 62 per cent of the population should access improved sources of drinking water by 2015. According to the 2011 Demographic Health Survey (EDHS), more than half of the households (54 per cent) have access to an improved source of drinking water, compared to 35 per cent in 2005 and 25 per cent only in 2000.

However, the country is lagging behind on sanitation target. While the MDG target for access to improved sanitation facilities is 58 per cent, only 8.3 per cent of the population has access to improved sanitation. Encouragingly, 61.6 per cent of the population has access to some form of sanitation facilities.

Based on these facts the Ethiopian Institute of Water Resources carried out its third summer community outreach/engagement program for undergraduate students from July 1-August 30, 2014. Students were given the opportunity to learn how to do community outreach and research, while learning how to work in interdisciplinary teams. The objective of the summer outreach activity was to provide students the opportunity to perform socially relevant outreach, thus uniting educational and research missions with community priorities and needs. Faculty from five partner universities (Addis Ababa, Arba Minch, Bahir Dar, Hawassa and Mekelle) helped to select students to participant, and to plan and implement the program.



*Participants of the community sensitization at Mecha woreda, Amhara Regional State*

A total of 96 (64 male and 32 female) undergraduate students from five EIWR partner universities were given opportunity to participate in the program. The selected students had backgrounds in the water science, social-sciences and health disciplines. The students spent 40 days within selected communities and worked in multi-disciplinary groups of three.

While in the field the students conducted surveys, completed observational checklists, and interviewed people in households. They also shared information on the critical moments of hand washing, the importance of safe cooking practices, the importance of separating animals and humans, the importance of having a safe water source like protected well and spring, vector control issues etc). They also distributed a two page hand washing poster which depicted the steps of hand washing and cleansing rituals.



*Showing steps of hand washing at the community sensitization at selected kebele of Hagereslam Woreda, Tigray Regional State*

The students reported that they valued the project because put them in the company of engaged, proactive, and passionate peers from different disciplines. They learned to work in teams and improved their research and community outreach skills. Some reported that it the experience gave them the opportunity to learn more about the realities faced by people living in rural areas and peaked their interest in continuing graduate work in public health. They also gained the ability to synthesize their academic

coursework with real world experience, learned the importance of developing context sensitive solutions that best serve the need of the local communities, were pleased that they had an opportunity to give back to the community.

The project yielded some unexpected additional outcomes. The students' engagement initiated community interest on WaSH and communities started to demand their rights from government (e.g. AAU students engagement in Sheno town) Student engagement also stirred woreda government representatives to commit to respond to community demands and find solutions to communities problems.



*Student representative presenting the major WaSH related problems observed during their stay*