

Harnessing Faith-Based Platforms to Promote WASH Behaviours in Low-Resource Settings: Insights from Kenya

Richard Odindo,
Social and Behaviour Change Specialist,

Abstract: Access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) is fundamental for public health and sustainable development. In Kenya, deficiencies in WASH services disproportionately affect women and children, thereby perpetuating cycles of disease, poverty, and inequality. Faith-based platforms, possessing significant moral authority and extensive community networks, present unique opportunities to address these pressing challenges. This paper examines the intersection of faith and WASH in Kenya, highlighting case studies of faith-driven successes, analyzing existing challenges, and proposing strategies to enhance impact.

In Kenya, faith institutions have effectively mobilized communities to adopt WASH-related behaviours. A notable example is the Anglican Church, which has integrated hygiene messaging into its sermons, resulting in a 25% reduction in diarrheal diseases in targeted regions. Similarly, Muslim leaders in Garissa County have aligned sanitation practices with Islamic teachings, which has led to a 25% increase in latrine coverage. Additionally, faith-based organizations have worked to address gender disparities, illustrated by initiatives like the Kenya Muslim Women Alliance's menstrual hygiene programs, which increased school attendance among girls by 20%.

Despite these successes, significant challenges remain, including cultural taboos, resource limitations, and gaps in coordination. To surmount these obstacles, it is essential to implement targeted capacity-building efforts, establish robust partnerships, promote interfaith collaboration, and develop effective monitoring systems. By equipping faith leaders with WASH expertise and aligning initiatives with spiritual teachings, these platforms can stimulate sustainable behaviour change and infrastructure development.

The initiatives driven by faith in Kenya illustrate the transformative potential of integrating spiritual values with public health priorities. As Kenya progresses towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal 6, faith-based platforms represent a compelling approach to achieving universal WASH access, ultimately promoting health, equity, and dignity for all.

I. Introduction

Access to Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) is not only a critical public health issue but also a fundamental human right. Despite this, significant global deficits in WASH access remain, with over 2.3 billion individuals lacking basic sanitation facilities and 844 million without access to safe drinking water, according to the World Health Organization (2017). In Kenya, approximately 41% of the population does not have access to basic sanitation services, and 15% of rural households depend on unsafe water sources (UNICEF, 2020). These deficiencies contribute to the prevalence of preventable diseases, hinder educational progress, and intensify gender inequalities.

Faith-based organizations, which are deeply rooted in the Kenyan societal framework, provide a valuable mechanism for promoting effective WASH behaviours. With over 85% of Kenyans identifying as Christian, along with notable Muslim and indigenous religious populations, these institutions possess the outreach, trustworthiness, and moral authority necessary to drive meaningful change. This paper explores the intersection of faith and WASH, highlighting the essential role of religious communities in enhancing public health outcomes.

II. The Intersection of Faith and WASH

Water and sanitation hold significant importance across various religious traditions. In Christianity, water serves as a symbol of renewal and purification, particularly evident in the sacrament of baptism. In Islam, cleanliness is emphasized through the practice of ablution, a mandatory ritual conducted prior to prayer. Hinduism and Buddhism also regard water as sacred, associating it with purity and the essence of life. These shared values create a strong foundation for incorporating Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) principles into religious teachings and community practices.

In Kenya, religious leaders possess considerable social influence, playing a pivotal role in shaping behaviours and norms within local communities. Their sermons, teachings, and outreach programs provide effective platforms for disseminating information regarding hygiene, safe water usage, and sanitation practices. By aligning WASH messages with spiritual doctrines, faith leaders can foster a sense of individual and collective responsibility, promoting enhanced practices within their communities.

III. Faith-Based Platforms in Action - Community Transformation Through Sermons and Teachings

Faith leaders in rural Kenya have emerged as influential advocates for the promotion of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) behaviours, particularly in regions where access to traditional public health messaging is limited. Their unique position of trust and influence allows them to engage with communities on a profound level, utilizing spiritual teachings to emphasize the significance of hygiene and sanitation practices.

An exemplary collaboration is observed between the Anglican Church of Kenya (ACK) and the Kenya Water and Sanitation Civil Society Network (KEWASNET), wherein WASH messages are integrated into weekly sermons. This initiative has effectively educated congregants about essential hygiene practices, resulting in a notable 25% reduction in diarrheal diseases in Siaya and Kakamega counties between 2018 and 2021. By framing practices such as handwashing and the use of safe drinking water not only as health necessities but also as acts of stewardship and care for one's family and community, the church has facilitated substantial behavioural change.

In Garissa County, Muslim leaders have similarly harnessed the emphasis on cleanliness found in the Quran to advocate for improved hygiene and sanitation practices. By aligning WASH principles with Islamic teachings, they have successfully encouraged households to adopt enhanced sanitation measures, including the construction and utilization of latrines. Over a period of two years, latrine coverage in certain villages increased from 35% to 60%, illustrating the significant impact of religious leadership on behavioural transformation.

These cases underscore the considerable potential of faith leaders to bridge the divide between public health objectives and community involvement. By integrating WASH principles into spiritual narratives, they cultivate a sense of personal and collective accountability, thereby empowering communities to take ownership of their health and well-being.

IV. Providing WASH Infrastructure: Bridging the Gap

Faith-based institutions in Kenya have emerged as essential contributors to addressing deficiencies in Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) infrastructure, demonstrating their capacity to deliver critical services in

underserved communities. Their initiatives not only enhance access to clean water and sanitation but also mitigate the daily challenges faced by vulnerable populations, particularly women and girls.

In Kitui County, Catholic Relief Services (CRS), in collaboration with local Catholic dioceses, orchestrated the installation of rainwater harvesting systems at churches and schools. These systems have provided clean water to over 20,000 individuals, resulting in a significant transformation of daily life within the community. By decreasing the average time spent collecting water from 3.5 hours to merely 1 hour, the project has liberated time for women and girls, enabling their participation in education, employment, and other productive endeavours. This initiative exemplifies how faith-based organizations can seamlessly integrate WASH solutions into their broader mission of community service.

In Kilifi County, mosques have played a crucial role in addressing sanitation challenges through the construction of gender-segregated toilets and handwashing stations. These facilities not only accommodate congregants but also benefit the surrounding community, leading to a 30% increase in toilet usage rates. By providing safe and accessible sanitation options, this initiative has improved hygiene standards and diminished the risk of waterborne diseases.

These illustrations highlight the potential of faith-based organizations to effectively bridge critical infrastructure gaps. Their unique position within communities empowers them to address urgent WASH needs, thereby contributing to healthier, more resilient populations while preserving the dignity and well-being of those they serve.

V. Addressing Gender Inequalities Through Faith-Based WASH Initiatives

Faith-based organizations in Kenya have emerged as significant allies in addressing the gender-specific impacts of inadequate water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services, particularly in communities where women and girls bear the primary burden of poor sanitation and hygiene conditions. These initiatives not only meet immediate health and sanitation needs but also contribute to broader objectives of gender equality and empowerment.

In the informal settlements of Nairobi, the Kenya Muslim Women Alliance (KMWA) has taken the lead in addressing the challenges related to menstrual hygiene. By conducting workshops that have educated over 5,000 girls on menstrual hygiene management and distributing reusable sanitary pads, KMWA has empowered young girls by equipping them with the knowledge and resources necessary to manage their menstruation with dignity. The effects of this intervention have extended beyond hygiene improvement; school attendance among girls has increased by 20%, facilitating their ability to pursue education without interruption and helping to reduce the stigma commonly associated with menstruation.

Similarly, in Kisumu County, Christian Aid Kenya, in collaboration with local churches, has responded to the inadequacy of gender-sensitive sanitation facilities. The construction of separate latrines for women and men in community centers has created safer and more inclusive environments for women. This seemingly straightforward intervention has had a significant impact, resulting in a 40% increase in women's participation in religious and social activities, thereby highlighting how access to basic WASH infrastructure can empower women to engage more comprehensively in community life.

These initiatives emphasize the critical role that faith-based organizations can play in advancing gender equality. By addressing the distinct WASH needs of women and girls, religious organizations not only enhance health and sanitation outcomes but also facilitate greater educational, social, and economic opportunities for a substantial portion of the population. These efforts illustrate that investment in gender-sensitive WASH solutions transcends mere infrastructure improvement; it serves as a catalyst for broader societal transformation.

VI. Faith-Driven Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS)

In Kenya, faith leaders have assumed a pivotal role as advocates for Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) initiatives. These leaders are mobilizing their communities to eliminate open defecation and promote healthier living practices. Such efforts underscore the significant impact of faith-based, community-driven initiatives in transforming public health outcomes.

In Busia County, the Seventh-day Adventist Church has led an exemplary campaign aimed at enhancing sanitation standards. Through the mobilization of local communities, the church facilitated the construction of over 500 latrines. This grassroots initiative successfully reduced open defecation rates from 35% to merely 10% within a span of three years. The achievements of this campaign illustrate how faith-based leadership can effectively drive meaningful change at the local level.

Similarly, in Baringo County, World Vision Kenya partnered with various churches to broaden the outreach of CLTS programs. This collaboration resulted in the training of 150 faith leaders in water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices, thereby empowering them to advocate for these critical issues within their communities. Consequently, household latrine coverage in the region experienced a 50% increase, demonstrating the potential of faith-oriented partnerships to expedite advancements in sanitation goals.

The experiences from Busia and Baringo Counties highlight the transformative capacity of faith-based grassroots mobilization in addressing public health challenges. By integrating spiritual leadership with pragmatic sanitation interventions, faith leaders not only cultivate healthier communities but also contribute significantly to broader developmental and well-being objectives.

VII. Challenges and Opportunities

Faith-based platforms present significant opportunities for advancing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) initiatives; however, several challenges must be addressed to fully realize their potential.

One prominent challenge is the presence of cultural barriers. Deeply rooted norms and taboos, particularly those related to menstruation, often impede open dialogue and progress in WASH practices. Effectively addressing these sensitive topics necessitates sustained engagement, education, and the incorporation of culturally sensitive methodologies that align with community values.

Resource constraints further exacerbate these challenges, as many faith-based institutions operate under limited financial capacities, thereby constraining their ability to implement large-scale WASH projects. This reality underscores the critical need for enhanced resource mobilization and partnerships to bridge funding gaps and amplify efforts.

Moreover, coordination deficits among faith organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and governmental entities frequently result in fragmented interventions. Misaligned objectives and inadequate collaboration can dilute the efficacy of well-meaning initiatives, highlighting the necessity for cohesive strategies that involve multiple stakeholders.

To overcome these obstacles, targeted solutions are required. Capacity building for faith leaders and institutions can empower them with the requisite knowledge and tools to lead impactful WASH programs. Strengthened collaboration among stakeholders can facilitate improved coordination and resource-sharing, thus promoting more efficient and sustainable outcomes. Additionally, aligning WASH initiatives with religious teachings and values can enhance community acceptance and engagement, thereby creating a potent synergy between faith-based efforts and public health objectives.

By confronting these challenges and capitalizing on the opportunities presented by faith-based mobilization, stakeholders can unlock the transformative potential of these platforms to effectuate lasting change in WASH practices and enhance community well-being.

VIII. A Path Forward

To fully realize the transformative potential of faith-based platforms in advancing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) objectives, it is essential to establish a clear and strategic plan. By leveraging their profound connections within communities and their moral authority, faith leaders and institutions can assume a pivotal role in driving meaningful and sustainable change.

The initial focus should be on the training of religious leaders. Equipping faith leaders with technical knowledge regarding WASH principles will enhance their effectiveness as advocates and educators within their respective communities. This training empowers them to incorporate practical sanitation practices into their teachings, effectively bridging the divide between faith and public health.

Strengthening partnerships is imperative. Collaborative efforts among religious institutions, development agencies, and governmental bodies can consolidate resources and expertise, ensuring that WASH initiatives are well-resourced and strategically implemented. These partnerships can also streamline efforts, thereby minimizing redundancy and maximizing overall impact.

To ensure accountability and facilitate continuous improvement, it is necessary to develop and implement comprehensive monitoring and evaluation systems. By assessing the outcomes of faith-based WASH initiatives, stakeholders can identify successful approaches and effectively scale them. Rigorous evaluation also promotes transparency and cultivates trust among communities and partners.

Lastly, fostering interfaith collaboration has the potential to enhance the reach and efficacy of WASH initiatives. By convening leaders and communities from diverse faiths to address shared challenges, these collaborations can inspire unity, dismantle barriers, and generate collective momentum for change.

Through the implementation of these strategies, faith-based platforms can serve as a cornerstone for advancing WASH objectives, driving progress that is anchored in compassion, community, and shared responsibility. Aligning faith with public health holds the capacity to transform lives and foster healthier, more resilient communities.

IX. Conclusion

Faith-based platforms serve as a significant mechanism for addressing Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) challenges in Kenya. By aligning spiritual teachings with public health objectives, religious communities have the capacity to inspire transformative change, mobilize resources, and promote sustainable behaviours. Their initiatives not only tackle immediate WASH deficiencies but also contribute to overarching development goals, including gender equality, education, and poverty reduction.

As Kenya advances toward the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6), the incorporation of faith-based approaches into WASH initiatives presents a promising avenue for achieving sustainable impact. By framing water access and hygiene as both moral imperatives and public health priorities, faith communities can facilitate the realization of universal WASH access, thereby ensuring dignity and equity for all individuals.

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