Unilever: saving lives through promotion of handwashing, sanitation and access to clean, safe water

IN 2012 UNILEVER COMMITTED to helping more than 1 billion people improve their health through the Unilever Sustainable Living Plan that combines business, environmental and social impact.

The company’s commitment encompasses three essential areas of activity: promotion of handwashing, provision of safe drinking water and ensuring clean, safe toilets.

Unilever’s Lifebuoy soap brand aims, through targeted programs, to improve the handwashing behavior of 1 billion people in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and Latin America, including school children and mothers with newborns. Handwashing with soap is proven to reduce diarrhoeal disease and pneumonia - the world’s two leading causes of deaths in children under the age of 5. The company’s safe drinking water initiatives are promoted through the Unilever range of water purifiers, while the company’s Domestos brand helps people gain access to hygienic toilets.

Unilever’s approach has been effective not only in saving lives but also driving increased sales growth, enabling the company to invest more in researching and developing innovations – such as Lifebuoy’s patented germ protection technology, Activ Natural Shield.

Key Results:

- 183 million people reached through Lifebuoy’s handwashing behavior-change campaigns, currently active in 16 countries
- Lifebuoy NeoNatal program, rolled out since 2013 reaches new mothers and birth attendants with hygiene education in Indonesia, India and South Africa.
- 55 million people provided with safe drinking water from Pureit, which aims to provide 150 billion liters of safe drinking water by 2020
- Results from a clinical trial in Mumbai demonstrating use of soap evidenced a 25% reduction in incidences of diarrhoea among children aged five, a 19% reduction in acute respiratory infections, a 46% reduction in eye infections and improved school attendance
- Over 25 million euros spent on handwashing program development and deployment plus evaluation studies
- Handwashing, sanitation (toilet) and water purification programs implemented in more than 25 countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America
PARTNERSHIPS

Partnerships with governments and local organisations are critical to scaling up Unilever’s programs and enable the company to continuously improve the quality of implementation, making hygiene education and sanitation interventions sustainable over the long term. By tapping into existing on-ground networks and expertise the company can also reduce costs and reach more people.

In Kenya, Lifebuoy worked with PSI Kenya and the Kenyan Ministry of Health to integrate Lifebuoy’s School of 5 handwashing program into their School Health Plan for the country. Kenyan Ministry of Health officials were involved with the training and monitoring of the School of 5 demonstrating their commitment to the program. The success of the partnership has resulted in the Ministry showing interest in collaborating further with PSI across other geographies in Kenya, using the School of 5 program to address handwashing education needs.

In addition to working with partners on implementation in-country, Unilever also works with others to raise the profile of WASH issues. For example, the company has collaborated with the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine on the publication of two joint advocacy reports which have provided new insights into the sanitation crisis: *Toilets for Health and Mapping Sanitation Solutions. We Can’t Wait*, in collaboration with WaterAid and the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council (WSSCC) examines the plight of women in the sanitation crisis and the urgency required to address it. These, together with high-profile campaigns with other partners have helped to shift the policy agenda, with more focus being put on sanitation. On 19 November 2013, World Toilet Day was officially recognized by the United Nations.

LESSONS LEARNED

The company is keen to ensure that its WASH interventions are sustainable and economically viable. Since 2010, the company has made strong progress in developing models which more than halve the cost per contact. Partnerships with local NGOs and governments have been critical to handwashing with soap behaviour change models.

The company is now exploring new approaches such as digital based behavior change approaches which could unlock greater scale if they can be proven to drive behavior change. Reaching local communities in ways that enable success and scale is an on-going area of innovation, given that local circumstances vary and that the model needs tailoring in each new setting.

NEXT STEPS

Unilever has begun to explore how to maximise its impact and unlock efficiencies by combining individual initiatives into integrated WASH programmes. In order to create the right enabling environment the company is also engaging in public policy debate at local and global levels to raise the profile of WASH issues and ensure that they receive the resources and attention they deserve. Within the Post-2015 Development agenda, for example, the company is calling for targets that aim to end open defecation and enable universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation and hygiene. It is also calling for an indicator which measures the percentage of handwashing facilities with soap and water in homes, primary and secondary schools and health centres.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the company would also like to see recognition of the role of WASH in tackling poverty, undernutrition, ill-health and inequality by including indicators on WASH under these goals or interlinkages between the different areas.