

Report on African Sanitation and Hygiene Conference, AFRICASAN 2008, Durban South Africa

By Mary Omble Wuya

Introduction

The 2nd African conference on sanitation and hygiene Africa san + 5, was held in Durban South African, February 18-21, 2008. this was a special conference with the year 2008, being declared an international year of sanitation, it was a great opportunity to highlight key issues on sanitation on the African continent. Most importantly it was an opportunity to confirm or disprove what several critics have expressed over the years that Africa might not necessarily be on track to meet the MDG target goal on sanitation. The AfricanSan was a follow up to access progress made and adopted during the first AfricanSan which took place in Johannesburg, South Africa 2002. The conference for 2008 was a key opportunity to assess critical issues such as progress, challenges, best practices and lessons identified as each African country strives to achieve the MDG goal 7, target of halving the population of the 2.6 billion Africans who do not have access to basic sanitation.

Participants

At the event participants conveyed from different parts of Africa from West Africa, East, South and North Africa. Over 628 delegates were in attendance, including Ministers from 30 countries. International Donor agencies working in the area of sanitation and hygiene such as UNICEF, PLAN and a host of others were equally in attendance. I participated under the sponsorship of GWA, as a representative of the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA).

Sessions

About 17 different sessions took place ranging from; financing sanitation, developing policies to scaling up approaches such as community led total sanitation and sanitation marketing as well as promoting and supporting the role of women as a critical issue in sanitation and hygiene practices. Sessions were held sometimes by regions where heads of delegations from different countries high lighted the sanitation situation report in their countries. At the end of the sessions, delegates identified and agreed to critical areas and actions that should be further developed, funded and monitored until 2010, where progress in these critical areas will be subsequently measured. Some of these critical areas include; institutional arrangements; coordination; policy/ strategy; financing; demand led and supply fed sanitation and hygiene; capacity building; decentralization; measurement of impact as well as monitoring and evaluation. However, countries and participating organizations such as GWA are expected to develop their activities in line with these critical areas. That is in collective responsibility with its members as it fits GWA role as a stake holder in sanitation and hygiene regarding gender mainstreaming.

Gender and Sanitation

Gender, especially relating to women was identified as critical in addressing all aspects of sanitation if the MDG goal on sanitation especially in African countries is to be achieved.

The role of gender in sanitation and hygiene was captured as one of the key national action plans in policy and strategy. Subsequently were made by recommendations discussants to develop a national policy on sanitation and hygiene including a specific attention on special groups such as women. I made several interventions, particularly highlighting GWA roles in harnessing the political will of Wives of Governor's in Nigeria as Gender and Water Ambassadors to push for Gender, Water, Sanitation and Hygiene issues in the political agenda. Although several of the sessions were devoted to sanitation hardware, knowledge sharing and best practices to be adapted by participating countries. In the sessions concerning institutional arrangements, policy and strategy, discussants argued that the role of gender in sanitation was not clearly defined. Several countries do not have a clear cut policy that takes care of gender issues and how sanitation affects women. Good examples of countries who have taken the lead by putting down institutional guidelines and policies include Ethiopia, Mali, Senegal, Uganda and Burkina Faso. Other countries were challenged to take the issue of gender mainstreaming as a critical tool for achieving progress in sanitation and hygiene. Certain discussants raised the issue that safety of women is still not guaranteed as stories recounted have showed that women are still assaulted due to lack of toilet facilities in several African communities. However, others noted that even though programme design and implementation of WASH programs in some communities have significantly tried to create awareness about gender issues. A lot still has to be done as most women are still not a part of the decision making process when it comes to location of such facility. Given these concerns and several other issues raised, it was agreed that the issue of gender would be achieved more aggressively through pushing for policy formulation and strategies to be implemented to reverse the negative trend. There was a call for countries with no such institutional arrangements and policies to develop a National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy/ strategy with a special focus on vulnerable groups including women. While those countries that do have such institutional arrangements and policies in place, but have no clear cut link with financial strategy for sustainability were advised to develop a cost implementation plan. These plans should be properly linked to a sustainable finance strategy and should be reflected as a sanitation and hygiene budget line in the countries national budget.

GWA and African Awards for NGOs

The AfricanSan Conference has instituted an AfricaSan awards and the important categories for the civil society and NGOs will be the women's award for work on water sanitation and research to the tune of fifteen thousand dollars. GWA and its members within the continent can begin to mobilize and strategize to be a part of this competition. This will significantly aid in promoting gender issues in sanitation and hygiene as well as attracting maximum publicity. National governments will be equally encouraged to support findings for such research on a large scale. These series of awards will be rolled for a 2 year period of interval.

The NGOs in attendance in their collective submission noted however by way of conclusion that there is a vital need to project the vital role that is played by women in sanitation and hygiene in most African communities. Other issues equally raised by the NGOs include;

- Sustainability should not be seen as related only to technology but there is every need to emphasize sanitation and hygiene education.
- The need to strengthen wash and health clubs in schools in order to promote a culture of hygiene and sanitation among pupils with emphasis on the role that gender plays in African communities.
- Private sector and the role they can play in mobilizing resources and monitoring and evaluation.

EMERGING ISSUES AT AFRICAN 2008

2008 being an international year of sanitation as declared by the United Nations, there were concerns to scale up and sustain initiatives in various areas such as:

- Gender mainstreaming in all sanitation and hygiene areas is a critical issue to be promoted. Several times women are clearly not considered when sanitation issues are discussed.
- The challenges for V.I.P latrines sustainability which is still a key problem.
- Cultural taboos and attitudes of the people still a problem i.e some rural communities still refuse to construct a toilet in the house. This has been attributed to their cultural beliefs, preferring open defecation which creates a vicious circle and tends to pollute these communities water sources.
- There is need to scale up advocacy on these issues as even areas where these eco san V.I.P facilities are available some communities refuse to utilize them.
- VIP technology is not an issue but the other intervening variables such as what people dump into the VIP latrines come into play in terms of maintain and sustaining the structures.
- Lack of policy consistency in sanitation is a key problem across all the Africa regions in attendance. For instance the ministries who should be in charge of sanitation is a big issue; in some countries, ministry of environment takes the lead, while in other countries the ministry of health, other countries it is the ministry of water resources and some countries have stand alone institutions to handle sanitation. Clearly delegates conceded there is a need to synergize and coordinate all the efforts being carried out by the different organizations to have a clear line of action on what needs to be done.
- Institutional challenges decentralizing of institutions and agencies so each one knows what each is doing.
- Knowledge sharing challenges this is a critical issue especially lack of knowledge on best practices for effective work on what works is still a problem.
- There is a need for more and effective networking in order to share information so that the challenge of sanitation in the continent can be met.

- Lack of sustainability of the V.I.P and clearing out of waste.
- A key challenge for achieving the MDG target on sanitation is how Civil Society, International NGOs such as GWA and government can work in terms of protecting the environment. This will help to deal with the impact of sanitation on the environment.
- The increasing rate of population in urban, semi-urban, poor communities without strategic town planning is a major concern especially for large cities like Lagos etc.
- Service provision to the people in terms of water and waste management is a critical issue. Water and waste management without a wholistic approach remains a daunting challenge on the African continent.
- Advocacy, research and development should be extensively carried out in order to scale up sanitation in the year.

National Action Plans and Ministerial Declaration.

The conference came to a close with a ministerial declaration by Ministers in attendance which serves as a gesture of commitment by Africa leaders to ensure their governments commitment as Ministers and heads of delegation, Africa Ministers Council of Water and Sanitation AMCOW. The ministry declaration noted that more than 60% of 5.9 billion African people do not have access to sanitation. Most importantly, improved sanitation has a multiplier effect of reducing illness and poverty especially among women. The Council of Ministers in their declaration agreed to promote and push the recommendations made at Africa San 2008 to their home governments. This is to significantly improve the profile of hygiene and sanitation through out the year as a poverty reduction strategy which will be sustainable and effective in the long run.

A detailed action plan was worked on and debated on with contributions from all the sessions. This will serve as a guide for each country to adapt to its own peculiar context. Each country's delegation is to assess their current status, using their own special situations, regarding country specific action plan which will include timelines and specific responsibility to be submitted to Africa Ministers Council of Water and Sanitation (AMCOW) by June 30, 2008. The Nigeria ministry representative has already called on Nigeria delegation to submit their own points to the ministry of water resource. This is to measure and monitor progress against the national plans and report what has been done during the next Africa san meeting in 2010. The conference officially came to a close with a press conference and an official declaration of the African International Year of Sanitation.

Media Chat

Representing GWA at Africasan, 2008

Mary Omble Wuya in televised interview with SABC and News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) Central and Southern Africa by Bureau Chief Kevin Okunzuwa

Kevin; Can you throw some light on your participation at the Africasan?

Wuya; I am here as a member and representative of Gender and Water Alliance, a global organization concerned about gender issues and its relationship with water, sanitation and hygiene. You know 2008; has been declared a UN international year of sanitation, so I am here to highlight key issues on gender and sanitation with a special focus on the Nigerian situation.

Kevin; How would you assess the Nigerian situation in terms of sanitary standards and conditions especially on a comparative basis with South Africa, you know there is a concern that several African countries are not on track to meet the MDG target for sanitation.

Wuya; Oh well, South Africa seems to have contained some of the problems faced by the daunting sanitation challenges faced by many African countries including Nigeria. But on a comparative basis, Nigeria still has a lot to do to significantly tackle its sanitation and hygiene problems. Some of these problems have been attributed to policy inconsistency such as sanitation being seen as a household responsibility as defined by the government's policy on sanitation. The role of gender is not clearly given its due place and recognition given the amazing work that most African women do to keep their homes and communities clean.

Kevin; what do you hope to achieve at Africasan?

Wuya; GWA and its members are working hard to advocate for gender mainstreaming so that gender disparities as the effect both men and women can be addressed. I hope to push for gender equity so that when policies at the national level are made gender responsiveness should be seen as a key indicator for measuring progress in relation to sanitation. This affects men and women differently, I know that in most homes in Nigeria, women take care of the environment, care for sick ones etc. so if the burden of disease can be reduce by promoting and cultivating a good sense of hygiene in terms; cleaning the environment, refuse disposal, utilization of toilets instead of open defecation. These will help to curb pollution of water sources which can lead to epidemics. These are the issues GWA would like to rise so that the burden for women can be marginally reduced.

Kevin; Thanks for your time and I hope you have successful deliberation.

Wuya; you're welcome.