

From our water correspondent

Winner of our competition, our new Water Correspondent is Sharon Murinda from Harare, Zimbabwe. She reports on the difficulty of running a hygiene campaign in a situation where meetings are often proscribed and funds are in short supply.

It was a lovely Tuesday morning when I woke up, but when I went to take a shower I found there was no running water. I took a five litre container of water and had a bath instead. It is bad enough when I do not have water, but I live in a medium-density part of Harare and there are only five at our place – what about those in the high-density areas, living eight people to a three-roomed house and using community taps, or having shallow wells in their homes with the toilets only one metre away from the water point?

That morning I went to Epworth, one such peri-urban area 14km from Harare's city centre. The children who greeted me looked very dirty, so I asked jokingly when they had last bathed and to my shock one replied that it was about ten days ago – there hadn't been water for two weeks, and the little water they got, had to be used for drinking and cooking. I went straight to the local clinic and I asked the

nurses about the trends for diarrhoea and she explained to me how serious the cases were becoming. I realized that we need to conduct an emergency health and hygiene education session within such an environment, so I took one of the nurses and we met the chairperson for Epworth and I told him my idea. He immediately called his representatives in all the wards in his area. It was around lunch time when more than two hundred people had gathered at an open space where they normally conduct their meetings.

This in itself was an achievement – during these days of political unrest we have to avoid holding meetings on days when there are major political events otherwise the people may be beaten up if they are discovered meeting in groups.

Initially I reminded them of their current problems and the impact on their health. The nurse was there to support and to instill confidence in people. I began telling them about SODIS, a simple, low-cost technology to improve the microbiological quality of drinking water through solar radiation and thermal treatment. Contaminated water is poured into transparent Polyethyleneterephthalate (PET) bottles and exposed to full

Sharon Murinda is a Research Officer, at the Institute of Water and Sanitation Development, Harare, Zimbabwe

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sunlight for six hours (or for two consecutive days if the sky is more than 50 per cent cloudy). I also explained the need for good hygienic practices and why they have to be observed all the time. I also emphasized that even if water is treated and there is no hygiene the diarrhoeal cases will not reduce. I had brought some PET two-litre bottles in my car which I gave those who had attended the meeting.

After the community meeting, promoters were trained so that they would promote SODIS. They go door-to-door promoting health and hygiene education as well as SODIS. Flyers were produced and the promoters moved around distributing them to the people in the area. Posters were also made and put at the local schools and health centres and the shopping area. Promoters were also given stickers for the households they visited – public commitment stickers and the memory aid stickers. With the public commitment stickers, they were told to leave these outside their homes so

that other people would see that they are doing SODIS and might come in and hear more about it. As for the memory aid, this was to be stuck in a prominent place so that the individual who was in charge of handling water would always be reminded to practise SODIS.

One problem we have encountered is that some of our promoters whom we recruited before the political campaigns began and who are very influential people in the communities, also support and campaign for their political parties. Thus some people who may not like these parties may not tolerate the promoters, which makes the programme less effective. We also have difficulties getting money to pay the promoters, and to print flyers, tokens and the stickers because of the cash crisis facing the central bank. In spite of all this I felt the day had gone well, and I left the promoters excited and hoping that the knowledge I had delivered would help them to improve their health.