

From our water correspondent

Our water correspondent, Sharon Murinda from Harare, reports on the effect that water shortages in her local school are having on children's health and education.

My father was not feeling well when he woke up this morning so I had to take my little brother to school. School starts at 7.30 a.m. but I arrived with him after 8 because I had to help him get ready for the day. Just before we arrived at the school, we saw some pupils playing in the road and coming towards us and I stopped and asked them why they were not heading for school. They said that there was no water today, and they spoke as if water scarcity in the school was normal. I asked them a few questions, trying to find out how they were coping with the situation.

To my surprise they said that most of the pupils no longer come to school when they realize that there is no water in the taps at home. This is really affecting their education. At the same time the girls said that during their menstrual period they don't go to school even if the water is running because they can't be sure that the water will be available all day long, and so they won't be comfortable. They also said that they can't even wash their hands

after using the toilet or before eating because most of time the water is not running. They also complained about the dirty toilets, saying that the cleaners were not cleaning their toilets properly, and they just use the toilets until they are full. Other pupils said they even prefer going to the back of the classroom and in the nearby bush.

After these discussions with the pupils I went inside the school campus to assess the situation on the ground. The school has 'hot seating', which means that another group of pupils come to school at 12 p.m. I went to the toilets to check their condition and I was not impressed at all. If they were like this at 9 a.m., what would they have been like in about three hours if the pupils had not been told to go home? I asked for permission to see the head of the school to discuss this with him.

He commented that much about the current state of the school was beyond his control and that they had no capacity to store water in case of emergency at the school. Even so, he said, it was important that the pupils stayed at school despite the fact that there was no water because they were very behind in their syllabuses. I then suggested conducting a health and

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hygiene education meeting with the next group which was coming for the afternoon session. The pupils came and assembled at their usual place and I was given the floor to train them. I taught them about the best hygienic practices: washing hands before eating and after using the toilet, avoiding shaking hands with others when there is no water and not using the bush as a toilet as this creates a breeding ground for disease-carrying organisms.

The meeting lasted for about two hours. The pupils also suggested that they could bring about two litres of water for handwashing and for drinking and they were willing to ask their parents to contribute money so that the school can construct a borehole. After the meeting, every pupil was convinced that this education was useful and was going to reduce cases of diarrhoea in their school as well as normalizing school attendance.