

Case Study // Round Table SDG 6: Making universal access to water and sanitation a reality in the UNECE region

Youth participation: voices from the schools of the pan-European region on access to water and sanitation

European Environment and Health Youth Coalition

Levels: national and local

Summary

The accessibility to safe water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) is an important environmental determinant of health and every child's right. This is one of the key goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Access to WASH for all children is also a priority set by countries under the 2010 Parma Declaration on Environment and Health and underpinned in the 2017 Ostrava Declaration. Yet, recent evidence shows that universal access to WASH in schools is not a reality across countries of the pan-European region. A cross-sectional study was conducted by the European Environment and Health Youth Coalition (EEHYC) in three countries of the Region as an example of collection of evidence and assessment of public opinion directly from the end-users in school. This is the first step in developing informed policies to improve WASH in schools and towards ensuring universal WASH and promoting children's health, well-being and education.

Situation

The countries considered in the survey face different challenges with respect to health and water and sanitation.

According to the WHO/UNICEF JMP analysis from 2017, the reported percentage of the population with access to safely managed drinking water is highest in Romania (99%), followed by Lithuania (92%) and the Republic of Moldova (70%). Access to safely managed sanitation is ensured for more than half of the population in Lithuania (61%) and Romania (57%), while in Republic of Moldova data on safely managed sanitation are not provided and 78% of the population is reported as having access to basic sanitation services. Data on hygiene are available only for the Republic of Moldova, where 87% have access to basic hygiene. (WHO/UNICEF JMP 2017)

Data from Romania and Lithuania on WASH in Schools were not retrieved, while in the Republic of Moldova two comprehensive surveys have been conducted by UNICEF and the National Public Health Centre. The results of these surveys showed a progressive improvement as well as health risks for pupils because of poor water quality, non-functional toilets and lacking adequate hygiene measures. (WHO Regional Office for Europe, 2016. *The situation of water, sanitation and hygiene in schools in the pan-European Region*)

Strategy

The EEHYC assessed pupils' opinion on WASH in schools by conducting a survey on hygiene knowledge, attitude and practice in Lithuania, the Republic of Moldova and Romania. The survey was conducted by mean of a paper-pencil questionnaire developed in English and then translated into the national languages. The questionnaire included 24 questions divided in 2 thematic sections: (1) on hygiene knowledge, attitude and practice and (2) on accessibility and acceptability of WASH services in schools.

The questionnaire was distributed to more than 2000 pupils in middle- and high school of the three selected countries in 2015. The WHO Regional Office for Europe supported the development and conduction of the survey.

Results and impact

- The study confirmed the gaps of WASH services in schools in the WHO European Region, showing that WASH services do not meet pupils' needs affecting healthy hygiene practice and fostering toilet avoidance, common in all countries.
- Results provide useful information on the challenges to tackle and their relevance as well as possible new approaches to improve accessibility. In particular, lack of consumable and low cleanliness is often reported, important aspects as they promote unhealthy practices. Adequate menstrual hygiene management was not always ensured. Results also showed that alternatives to tap water in the school bathrooms should be considered, as drinking from these is not common practice.

Challenges and lessons learned

- Students need to be reminded of health practices and their importance, such as hand washing and negative consequences of bad hygiene. There is a space for intervention with sustained education programmes including skill-based activities.
- It is important to assess the situation of WASH in schools and to consider disaggregated data to identify context-specific challenges and priorities. Peer to peer surveys, from young professionals to youth may facilitate data collection obtaining more honest responses.
- Proactive engagement of school end-users key to further assess the situation and better understand the reasons behind the identified issues, such as the lack of hygiene consumables. Involving students can help identifying context-specific problems and promote participatory, solution-oriented processes.

Potential for replication

The study could be replicated in any country of the Region and could be adapted to specific needs and aspects of interest (e.g. equity). The EEHYC is available to technically support countries in the adaptation and implementation of the survey at the local and national level and engaging the youth society. The implementation of a similar study format would be an important milestone to be considered in the National portfolios for action on environment and health to which countries committed under the Ostrava Declaration.

Contact

Name: Valentina Grossi
Organisation: European Environment and Health Youth Coalition