



A child scrap metal and plastic bottles amid festering piles of trash next to an open sewage lagoon in Saftawi. UNICEF/EI Baba

In densely populated Gaza, nearly a third of households are not connected to a sewage network. To cope with raw sewage, open sewage ponds or pools can be found, often in close vicinity of neighbourhoods. As Gaza slowly turns into an urban zone with few safe playgrounds, children are attracted like magnets by what looks like open spaces offering greenery and a rich birdlife. They play dangerously close to the holes of dirty water, unaware of the danger that lies beneath the sewage crust that float on top of the muddy water. Over the 2011-2012 winter season, three (3) fatal incidents were reported, involving three children who drowned in sewage pools located in Khan Yunis and Beit Lahiya. For the humanitarian community in the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), these tragedies highlighted the urgent need to raise awareness among children and their families over the hazards associated with water and waste water treatment plants, holding lagoons, temporary or permanent infiltration lagoons, and open culverts. They also highlighted the need to physically secure sewage lagoons by increasing their perimeter, fencing them and taking internal security measures.

A joint response to protect children's lives

Together with the Coastal Municipalities Water utility (CMWU), UN agencies and NGOs members of the interagency Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) cluster mapped out hazard areas around sewage lagoons or storm water basins in Gaza, based on a series of hazard criteria. A preliminary analysis mapped out 53 such risk areas, of which 16 were in need of an emergency intervention. A joint response was designed, with funding from the Humanitarian Response Fund (HRF) and the Government of Japan,

September 2012

Protecting children from the danger of sewage pools in Gaza: a C4D campaign

and in close cooperation with local and international NGOs, the inter-agency Child Protection Working Group and the Education Cluster.

Thanks to generous funding and support from the Government and the people of Japan, UNICEF is now leading awareness-raising efforts targeting children and their parents on the issues of safety and public health. UNICEF used the Communication for Development (C4D) approach to design an efficient, participatory Gaza-wide campaign aimed at raising awareness and consequently bringing about behavioural changes among parents on the need to care for their children and watch out when they go and play outside the house, paired with specific warnings on the dangers of sewage lagoons. The C4D tool was designed to bring about behavioural changes among the communities. Sustainable and long-term behavioural and social change is the bi-product of a participatory, human rights-based process of social transformation. This process helps facilitate change by giving voice to members of all communities and providing them with the skills they need to effectively advocate for long-lasting changes.

Communication for development: bringing about behavioural change among community members

This is why a bottom up participatory approach was used to design the C4D campaign. Discussions were held with all stakeholders, including UNICEF programme staff, UNICEF local partners and representatives from the local community, including children and teenagers. The discussions helped identify the 16 most affected communities, where urgent action was needed. They also helped determine a network of people who could best influence their communities and convince people to change their behaviour - grassroots partners, religious leaders and school teachers. (...)





Birds resting on the floating crust of sewage floating on top of the water at Beit Lahiya's sewage lagoon. UNICEF/EI Baba

(/...) A group of 200 volunteers, half of them teenagers, was selected to mobilize their communities and disseminate the key messages of the campaign to parents and children living around at-risk areas, promoting community engagement.

Key messages were developed through a participatory methodology, which helped ensure that they would be accurate, culturally appropriate but also appealing. The C4D message called on parents to watch out for their children when they play outside. It was paired with a safety message calling on children to stay away from sewage lagoons to avoid sinking and drowning.

These messages were disseminated by multiple channels of communication. Awareness-raising materials such as colourful leaflets were distributed, and billboards were installed at the entrance of the villages or towns where sewage lagoons threaten children. The messages were relayed by newspapers, radio broadcasts and social media online.

Community theatre reinforced the messaging

Sixteen theatre plays were showcased in the 16 communities living in the most at-risk areas, transforming social issues into a theatrical moment and using an interactive participatory approach where the audience. Volunteers went to public buildings such as hospitals, and from door to door distributing leaflets and explaining the danger of open sewage lagoons. They also facilitated community group sessions of mothers, fathers and community leaders to discuss the danger and how to avoid it, while religious leaders used mosques as a platform to reinforce the message.

"The highlight of the campaign for me was seeing the engagement of the communities.... from the children who freely participated in the field testing of the materials, to the youth volunteers who went door to door to give the messages, and to the community members who openly received and internalized the messages from the youth," says Diane Araki, Chief of UNICEF oPt's Field office in Gaza. "This engagement extended to the religious leaders who emphasized the message of caring for children during Friday prayers."

These activities were closely monitored. Initial assessments of the campaign show that these interventions have initiated discussion among the community and raised awareness about the dangers of sewage lagoons. Volunteers say that they managed to create an efficient platform for discussion about this issue, which is a very positive sign towards progressive social behavioural change. The expected long term impact is an end to children drowning in sewage lagoons, something which will be achieved by the C4D campaign but also by security measures on the ground, such as fencing at risk areas and improving sanitation in Gaza.

In the long run, these sewage temporary pools, established to cope with the enormous gaps in the coverage of sewage treatment infrastructure, should be removed. This can be achieved only provided Israeli authorities grant permission to construct appropriate waste water infrastructure. The volume of imported materials needed to expand and upgrade water and sanitation infrastructure has increased significantly since June 2010, but medium and small-scale projects cannot be implemented in blockaded Gaza.



A child walks past a UNICEF sign warning of the danger of sewage lagoons in Saftawi. UNICEF/EI Baba

C4D: empowering adolescents to act within their communities

In UNICEF, C4D uses dialogue and consultation with, and participation of children, their families and communities. This is why UNICEF recruited teenagers in UNICEF-supported Adolescent Friendly Spaces and Family centers across Gaza to help spread the C4D message about the need for parents to watch out their children when they're playing outside, paired with a safety message warning of the dangers of sewage ponds for children. UNICEF worked with partners Ma'an Development Centre, Tamer Institute for Community Education and Ashtar Theatre on these activities.

The 100 teenagers attended a workshop during which life skills educators taught them basic skills in advocacy, communication and community mobilization. They were then tasked with going from home to home to disseminate the messages. Not only did the project contribute to raising awareness and start behavioural change among parents and children, but it also empowered adolescents and helped them make positive contributions in their own communities.

In Beit Lahiya, north of Gaza, adolescents who volunteered explained that the large open space around the sewage pools of the local waste water treatment plant, which sits close to the houses, proves an irresistible magnet to children. "You have greenery, large pools and strange birds that you cannot find anywhere else, it's like going to a different country!", said Ahmed, 14. "We know we're not supposed to go there and there's an old fence, but there's not much else to do so some children sneak there anyway. I believe that as adolescents who know the environment, we have more influence on children living in our neighbourhood", he adds.

In Zeitun, inside Gaza City, a large open sewage pool sits directly in the middle of the neighbourhood, where it offers an uncannily lush landscape amid the densely packed rows of concrete buildings.

15-year-old Sawsan, who was involved in the campaign through the local Adolescent-Friendly center, recalls how frightened she was before it started. "At first, I was panicked at the idea of having to knock at someone's door. I thought I would never



Teenage girls wearing the campaign's outfits raise awareness among mothers at Zeitun's primary healthcare clinic.

UNICEF/EI Baba

be able to do it, that I might even flee in panic when I heard people coming to their doorstep. You can imagine my surprise when people welcomed me into their house, offered me and my co-volunteers fruit juice, and listened carefully to what I said while telling their children they must follow our advice." The adolescent adds that since this experience she has built a lot of self-confidence and talks more easily to her parents. "It's not about how old you are, it's about how knowledgeable you are!" the girl enthusiastically says.

"Adolescents were very excited to participate in this project as they felt empowered. Some of them had to do this for the first time, and it was challenging for them to go and meet people to discuss such issues. They broke this fear barrier and became more sociable", says Sajy Elmughanni, UNICEF oPt's Communication officer in Gaza. "Many of them also expressed how they felt valued as they were actively participating in a project destined to help their own community," he adds.

In Nuseirat refugee camp, teenagers who volunteered say they spoke with Bedouin families as their children often play along the sloppy edges of Wadi Gaza. Considered one of the most important coastal wetlands located on the Eastern Mediterranean Basin, Wadi Gaza offers rich flora and a station point for bird's migratory routes. However this unique ecosystem lays in the Middle Gaza Governorate, which has no wastewater treatment plant, and 16 million liters of raw sewage are now pumped into its stream every day, snaking through urban areas before being discharged into the Mediterranean. "We adolescents in Gaza have learnt how to raise our voice", says 15-year-old Ahmed, a volunteer. "This new skills we learnt will be most useful, not only to protect our communities but also to build a better future together."

What is Communication for Development (C4D)?

C4D is one of the most empowering ways of improving key social outcomes for children and their families. It is a systematic, planned and evidence-based strategic process to promote positive and measurable individual behaviour and social change that is an integral part of development programmes, policy advocacy and humanitarian work. It uses dialogue and consultation with, and participation of children, their families and communities. Evidence-based, rights-based and using a participatory approach, C4D privileges local contexts and relies on a mix of communication tools, channels and approaches.

Gaza's sewage 'deadly trap'



Children collecting scrap metal and plastic bottles dangerously close to the edge of a sewage pond in Saftawi. UNICEF/EI Baba

By Catherine Weibel

White birds fly low over the mirror-smooth pond, before landing in the grass where some start singing, much to the delight of 16-year-old Ahmed.

"Here you find birds that you cannot see anywhere else in Gaza. You can hear them sing and if you're lucky, you can even catch one and take him home where he will sing for your family", he marvels. "This is the most beautiful place I've seen in my life!" the boy adds, oblivious to the mountains of trash piled up on the shore of what actually is a sewage pond.

We are in Beit Lahiya's waste water treatment plant, which sits 200 meters from the first buildings of this densely populated neighbourhood in the north of the Gaza Strip. Despite the smell, its large sewage lakes attract children like a magnet as they offer the only open space in the area and yield different species of birds.

This uncanny landscape is treacherous. If the floating crust of sewage on top of the pools can support the weight of birds, it cannot support the weight of children. An 11-year-old boy broke through the crust and plunged to his death in February as he chased a bird. Back in December 2011, two siblings aged 2 and 4 drowned in another sewage pool in the south of the Gaza Strip.

Three children drowned in sewage ponds in two months

Across Gaza, an estimated 53 open cesspools threaten the lives of children. As nearly a third of households are not connected to a sewage network, many such pools have been established to receive raw sewage. The volume of imported materials

needed to expand and upgrade water and sanitation infrastructure has increased significantly since June 2010, but medium and small-scale projects cannot be implemented in the blockaded Gaza Strip as they have not been approved by Israel.

To protect the lives of children, UNICEF and other humanitarian agencies that are members of the Water, Sanitation and Health (WASH) cluster have launched a joint response. With funding from the Government of Japan, UNICEF started by leading an awareness-raising campaign targeting children and their families in 16 communities living close to the most hazardous ponds.

Children pick trash dangerously close to the edge of the sewage pond

Teenage volunteers, recruited in UNICEF's family and adolescent centers throughout the Gaza Strip, attended a training workshop before being sent to raise awareness among their own communities. UNICEF also installed billboards in the areas at risk, including in Saftawi, a very poor suburb north of Gaza City where an exposed sewage pond sits right next to family homes.

"In June, a three-year old child escaped the vigilance of his parents and crawled into the water where he almost drowned", says Hussam Hassan, the father of 18 children, whose house stands twenty meters from the pool.

As he speaks, children walk through festering piles of trash on the opposite side of the pond, dangerously close to the hole of muddy water. They live in makeshift shanties which sprang up between houses, and scrounge for anything they can sell. "It's difficult to be living in the smell of garbage and to suffer from the mosquitoes, but it's even worse to know that our children are at risk of falling in cesspools and drowning meters from our homes", Hassan says.

Saftawi is one of the eleven sewage ponds which will be fenced off as part of the joint humanitarian response. However this can only be a temporary solution. "We cannot leave a lake of liquid sewage in the middle of a neighbourhood, especially since it sometimes overflows and floods the houses", says Hassan, adding: "We need to be allowed to build real sanitation facilities, for the sake of our children".

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