1.0 Introduction

The link between education and health cannot be over emphasized. Education is the foundation of every human being and investing in Education has proven to sustain families, reduce maternal mortality, reestablish normality for traumatized children as well as create new jobs thus breaking the cycle of Poverty. However, when schools lack access to access to clean and safe pit toilets the ability for school children to remain in school and learn is jeopardized, they often fall sick and miss school days hence their poor academic performance. The fact is that 2.5 billion (1 in 3) people worldwide don’t have access to a safe, clean and private toilet and most of them live in sub-Saharan Africa and Asia according to UNICEF (1). Over 1800 children a day die from diarrhea disease due to lack of safe water, sanitation and basic hygiene. Many deaths related from severe diarrhea today kills a child in every 20 seconds making it the second most deathly disease in developing countries claiming lives more that HIV/AIDs, malaria and measles combined (2).

Goal 2.A of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals states that school children globally, boys and girls alike will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling by 2015 (3) but however lack of access to safe water and sanitation continues to hinder the attainment of this goal. Education and access to clean hygiene and sanitation are very critical to a child’s growth and wellbeing. When schools lack these basic facilities, learning opportunities are lost as children have to spend more time collecting water or looking for a safe place to urinate or defecate mostly in the open and when these children are girls the situation is even worse. WASH interventions generally improve the health and well being of persons in both educational and non-educational environments (4). The World Health Organization estimates that about 11% more girls often attend school when they have access to basic sanitation services (5). It is estimated that of the approximately 1.25 billion women globally who lack access to access to clean and safe sanitation, 526 million women have no choice than to defecate in the open (1). Over 7,500 people die daily due to a lack of sanitation, including 5,000 children under five years of age. Annually, 272 million schooldays are missed due to water-borne or sanitation-related diseases.

1.1 Toilets and the Millennium Development Goals

In 2000, world leaders during the United Nations General Assembly agreed to set eight overall development goals called the MDGs to be achieved by 2015. One of the target goals under ‘Environmental Sustainability’ goal was to halve the proportion of the population “without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.” The importance of toilets is so critical in achieving the Millennium Development Goals reason why a unanimous adoption of a resolution by all 193 member states of the United Nations led to designation of November 19th each year as World Toilet Day within the context of Sanitation for All with the goal of breaking the taboo around toilets and drawing attention to the global sanitation challenge. Last years theme on World Toilet Day was “Dignity and Equality” which focused on “Open Defecation and the Challenges for Women and Girls”. Access to clean and save toilets can be a stepping stone to healthy lives, human dignity, freedom, gender equality and a catalyst for development in communities but yet over 1.1 billion people globally still practice open defecation especially in rural areas as they have no private place to defecate and or urinate and most of them end up using the fields, bushes, ditches or just a plastic bag.
When these services are lacking, children tend to fall sick mainly from diarrhea diseases which affect their school attendance and their ability to learn and strive (6,7). For girls, lack of these services in schools puts them at risk of shame, sexual harassment and even rape. Health education is very critical in schools and the absence of WASH services during the day in schools does not only affect the learning environment for the children but for teachers as well. Just as text books are vital for a child's education, access to clean water and sanitation is vital as well. The power of these basic services in schools if implemented could have helped the international community reach three of the major Millennium development goals including access to universal primary education, environmental sustainability and gender parity in education. Analyst estimate that it will take 165 years before Sub Saharan Africa reach its sanitation target and another 350 years to meet its universal access (8). Just recently two teenage girls in India were gang-raped and murdered but this could not have happened if they had access to a clean and safe pit toilet. Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia are the most affected as according to UNICEF only 57% of children in Africa have access to clean water while in South Asia just 35% of children have access to a basic toilet and it is no coincidence that these regions have the lowest school enrollment rate with the highest number of out of school girls. (9)

Promoting the safety and dignity of girls while at school may urge more parents to send their daughters to school hence a reduction in school retention rate as they reach adolescent. Thus having toilets designed just for girls can have a positive impact on girl education. A recent study in Bangladesh showed that schools who had a separate toilet for girls increased their school retention rate by 15% (10). When girls stay in school and learn, we can break the cycle of poverty in the next generation and the chances for children to survive and strive is improved and when we make the school environment safer for girls, their male counterparts benefit too. Most girls while in school may experience an episode of their menstrual cycle and to them its an embarrassing experience hence the need for schools to provide adequate space for washing and cleaning as such services strongly influence their school performance and increases their chances to finish school. Providing these services are great but school curriculum must incorporate health education programs for both teachers and children so as to ensure their proper use for sustained health benefits. In many poor communities today, school is the only environment where children can learn and understand the direct relationship between health and safe hygiene practices and teachers have to receive training on how to teach and promote health safety tips such as proper hand washing before and after eating as well as safe waste disposal. Such practices help children to become better health educators for themselves and families in order to prevent diseases such as diarrhea.

For most of the world’s poor children, every school day is a precious opportunity so we must help them make the most of it. Children spend at least 7 hours at school each day and would want to use a toilet while in school and when schools lack these toilets, they end up going outside to defecate and the probability of them leaving school and not coming back is high since at times they have to travel long distances just to relieve themselves while some feel ashamed to return back to school for fear they would be penalized for soil their clothes since most don't even use a toilet paper to clean up. As crucial as toilets are to children, it is to teachers as well as they tend to spend even more time in school in order to prepare lecture notes or complete other related non teaching duties. The lack of toilets in schools directly affects the rate of school attendance of teachers as some go home during break and never come back resulting to several missed school hours.

### 1.2 Hope For Children Cameroon – Smiles When Pooping Project

In 2010, I founded HOPE for Children Cameroon, with one goal of educating every child, one school, one village at a time. This was as a result of my experiences after visiting some communities in my village in 2008 to carry out a study on “The Prevalence of malaria and helminthes infections alongside hemoglobin levels in children of school going age in Belo Sub-division in rural Cameroon. I came...
across malnourished children most of who were not in school and learning. Their basic rights rights had being violated, exploited and they felt desolated. Most of them children were mostly orphans and some living with a form of disability. Since 2010, we have provided tuition assistance to over 300 children and over 500 children have benefitted from school supplies in 3 different communities we work in.

However, in the course of our work, we realized that most children were falling sick in school and at home while most girls stayed home because most schools lacked safe and clean pit toilets. Even when we asked these kids how they felt about the state of their current toilets which they have been using for years they were so happy and enjoyed using it. To us we realized how comfortable they were using it since they had no other alternative. To address this health challenge we embarked on the construction of 3 clean and safe pit toilets in 3 primary schools in 2014 namely; Government Schools Fujua II, Njinikom and Baingo all in the North West Region of Cameroon which is currently serving over 1000 school children and has drastically eliminated the practice of open defecation hence ensuring that the health and immediate learning environment of these children is secured and safe. Early this year during a visit to some of the schools we work in by the co-founders, our organization identified 2 more schools in dire need of a toilets and we just finished construction pending official handing over to the school authorities in September when schools reopen.

a. Government Primary School Fujua II (2014)
b. Government Bilingual Primary School Njinikom - Njinikom Sub division (2014)
e) Government Primary School Isaibehsi – Belo (2015 – under completion)
1.3 Impact

The overall impact this has had on the communities, the children, their education and self esteem has been tremendous especially to the girls. Girls now can feel safe in schools, the practice of open defecation completely eliminated and school absenteeism from ill related causes dramatically reduced. School retention rate has drastically increased and more teachers and students come to school and stay in school. One of the head teachers in one of the schools made a remark that most children now get up in the morning and rush to school by 7am just so they can use the bran new toilets in school. We didn’t only build them toilets but we also made sure the boys had their own toilets different from the girls and by so doing, we are making them more aware of their gender and privacy as well. The teachers can now stay longer in school and prepare lesson notes because they now have toilets in school. Children can remain in school for long for tutoring and after school programs. In the communities we work in it’s considered that when you give a community a toilet you have provided them security and restored their dignity and to them these values are what they wish for their children. Our long term goal is to build over 30 new toilets in 30 different primary schools by 2020 so that child can feel secured, learn and strive in school.

Access to quality education and clean and safe toilets is the only investment we can give to women and girls. It’s very critical to ensure that girls can attend school and receive quality basic education. They must stay in school and complete their education and governments must ensure that conditions are created where girls and young women are safe, healthy, educated and fully empowered to realize their potential to transform their families, communities, economies and their societies. However no matter how affordable and innovative toilets maybe, they may not still be well utilized by school children especially girls so its very important that public health interventions and health education are tailored and culturally appropriate to change social norms. Health programs should be promoted in schools so that children can be able to teach their families and communities safe behavior while creating a positive cycle of knowledge and good health. There is therefore need for effective and clear leadership in projects that aim at providing water and sanitation in schools. In order to achieve the most ambitious Sustainable Development Goals, toilets can be the most effective tool to reach these goals.

1.4 Conclusion

As the MDGs expire in 2015, most of them were not achieved as too many people were left behind. However, as the international community prepares for the adoption of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals by member states next month during the United National General Assembly in New York, there is some optimism and energy in “Leaving No One Behind” and for this to translate to real change these goals have to be clearly defined and then measured. The target goal on sanitation in the SDS must ensure access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all and end open defecation and it promises adequate access to sanitation and hygiene access by all persons at home, in schools and health centers.
References

1. WHO/UNICEF, Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP), 2012


10. UNICEF 2014: ALL Chlldren In SChool By 2015 Global Initiative on out-of-School Children; South ASiA Regional Study Covering Bangladesh, India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka