

Promoting evidence-informed sanitation behaviour change in low- and middle-income countries

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Highlights

Evidence impact

- Systematic review findings informed Belgian Red Cross's plan to continue support for community-based water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) behaviour change interventions in its five-year development project in East Africa.
- Review findings of evidence gaps prompted Belgian Red Cross to design and commission a long-term evaluation in Tanzania.
- Evidence Aid's 2020 evidence repository for humanitarian interventions during the COVID-19 pandemic and a 2018 World Bank evidence brief for practitioners used review findings.

Factors that contributed to impact

- The researchers at Belgian Red Cross's Centre for Evidence-Based Practice were able to engage closely with the humanitarian agency's international operations teams.
- The review findings were timely for Belgian Red Cross, as it was embarking on a new five-year development project in East Africa.
- The research team included a former operations official dedicated to communicating research and acting as a bridge with potential internal and external users of evidence.

Systematic review details

Title: [Promoting handwashing and sanitation behaviour change in low- and middle-income...](#)

Authors: Emmy De Buck, Hans Van Remoortel, Karin Hannes, Thashlin Govender, Selvan Naidoo, Bert Avau, Axel Vande Veegaete, Alfred Musekiwa, Vittoria Lutje

Status : Completed June 2017



Context

Safe water, adequate sanitation and hygiene [can avert an estimated 9 per cent](#) of the global disease burden and about 6 per cent of all mortality. Several approaches have been developed over the past two decades that promote WASH interventions and sustain behaviour change for healthy WASH behaviours. While the evidence base for these interventions in low- and middle-income countries is fairly extensive, there are no synthesis studies about behavioural change approaches in WASH interventions.

3ie, in partnership with the Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council, supported researchers at Belgian Red Cross's Centre for Evidence-Based Practice to conduct a systematic review to help to fill this evidence gap. The systematic review looked at which promotional approaches might change handwashing and sanitation behaviour, and which implementation factors affect the success or failure of such promotional approaches.

Evidence

The systematic review found that promotional approaches can be effective at improving latrine use, safe faeces disposal, handwashing with soap, and open defecation. No single approach was most effective, with several promotional elements shown to induce behaviour change. These include (1) community involvement in the context of sanitation programmes; (2) social marketing in the context of sanitation programmes; (3) psychosocial approaches to promotion in the context of handwashing interventions; and (4) use of interpersonal communication as part of the communication strategy.

The researchers also highlighted that rigorous experimental studies on the effectiveness of handwashing and sanitation promotional approaches were still lacking, especially for social marketing, sanitation and hygiene messaging, and psychosocial promotion interventions.

Evidence impacts

Informed primary research

Evidence gaps highlighted by the 3ie-supported systematic review prompted the Belgian Red Cross to design interventions that include contextualised behaviour science-based components, as well as commission a long-term evaluation in Tanzania. The [published protocol for the evaluation](#) cites the review's findings.

“There are all these actors in the WASH sectors who have been doing projects and programmes for years. Instead of piloting interventions, it's actually an added value when you measure the impact on these ongoing projects. Working with the Centre for Evidence-Based Practice influenced us to improve our PMER [Planning, Monitoring, Evaluation and Reporting] approach to enable better impact measurement.”

Charlotte Schelstraete

Focal Point WASH

Belgian Red Cross

Backed Belgian Red Cross's operational approach

According to the operations team, findings of the review by Centre for Evidence-Based Practice's Buck and colleagues (2017) informed the Belgian Red Cross's decision to continue funding community-based WASH behaviour change interventions in its recent five-year development project in several countries in East Africa.

Strengthening WASH behaviour change approaches

Review findings have also been cited in international policy discussions. A [2018 World Bank evidence brief](#) titled 'Empowering households and individuals to co-produce positive health outcomes: for quality care amidst infrastructure and resource constraints' drew on review findings to identify the top handwashing and sanitation behaviour change approaches. The brief is part of the Bank's Frontline Health First series, intended to introduce policymakers to relevant

opportunities for reform and context-appropriate innovations.

A summary of the review has also been included in a [2020 collection of evidence relevant to COVID-19 response](#) produced by Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office-funded NGO Evidence Aid and translated into several languages to inform global humanitarian responses to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Suggested citation

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