



‘I’ve learned a lot of things’: A community health club set up by SWIFT changes sanitation and hygiene habits in Matongo

What has changed?

Matongo is a semi-urban village in South Kivu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the past, defecation took place mostly in the surrounding bush. Hand-washing with soap or ash wasn’t practised, food was left uncovered outside and discarded rubbish rotted in the roads.

Mutambala Alimasi Thomas, chief of Matongo village, says sanitation was poor and disease was rife. ‘There were a lot of cases of diarrhoea in the village,’ he remembers. ‘Households were often in a bad way, and there were deaths.’

Kashindi Mathiabu, 26, lives in a household of ten, including her husband, two children and her older sister’s children.

‘We didn’t have a latrine or a shower,’ she remembers. ‘We didn’t know a tippy-tap (hand-washing facility) was a good thing to have, or a rack for drying utensils. We didn’t know about hand-washing before eating, or keeping clean and dirty clothes separate.’

Now, however, as a result of work done through the SWIFT programme, the village has been transformed. Many families have constructed rubbish pits and household latrines with hand-washing facilities, and awareness of the importance of hygiene practices such as hand-washing and around the preparation of food has improved dramatically.

How has the change been achieved?

Tearfund with the support of Africa AHEAD has been helping communities in South Kivu to set up Community Health Clubs, an approach being piloted by the SWIFT programme in semi-urban areas of DRC. Membership of the clubs is voluntary, free and open to all, and each club typically has 50-100 members.

The clubs hold weekly discussions on health and hygiene topics, such as the safe storage of drinking water, or making soap to ensure ready availability. Members are given practical assignments; for example, digging a refuse pit, or making a dish rack to dry dishes off the ground. These assignments are monitored, and members receive stamps and certificates for attending sessions and completing tasks.

The Community Health Club in Matongo village, which is home to 150 households, has 65 members and meets every Sunday. ‘We meet regularly so that we don’t forget the good hygiene habits we’ve been learning,’ says member Mwalihasha Ramazani.

Kashindi Mathiabu says she has learned a lot since becoming a member. ‘I’ve learned about how to prepare food in a better, more hygienic way. How to talk to my neighbours about good hygiene and, because they have seen our situation here, they have now committed to changing what they do too,’ she says.

Why does it matter?

Within a few short months of the club being established, villagers noticed an improvement not just in their environment, but in their health and their sense of community.

‘There has been a drop in the number of people who are really sick, and there have been no deaths linked to poor sanitation and hygiene,’ says Mutambala.

‘It has all had an impact on the family,’ agrees Kashindi Mathiabu. ‘The health of the children is better, and I may be skinny but I’m healthy.’



Kashindi Mathiabu with her drying rack

Like many of the club’s members, the president of Matongo’s Community Health Club, 24-year-old Mwavita Wilondja, had never heard of a ‘club’ before. She joined because she was keen to change her old habits and learn some new ones, and has been struck by the spirit created by the weekly discussions.

‘We didn’t all know each other before the club started, and we have really started to know and care for each other,’ she says. ‘If a club member is sick, we go and visit them and help to take care of them. The club has helped us to live like brothers and sisters.’

What are the challenges?

The challenge for Matongo now is to maintain the smooth running of the Community Health Club, ensuring that members do not fall back into their old ways in terms of open defecation and poor hygiene habits, and establish long-term health improvements.

The club must also try to ensure that the new behaviours are adopted by the majority of Matongo’s residents, including non-members, in order to minimise the risk of sickness and disease spreading in the village.

How will the challenges be met and what makes this change sustainable?

Community Health Clubs are given a sound long-term footing, run as they are by management committees composed of president, vice-president, secretary, vice-secretary, treasurer, vice-treasurer and two water technicians. These committees work in collaboration

Stories and photos collected by Jane Beesley, freelance humanitarian communications specialist, and edited by Emma Feeny (Oxfam).

The SWIFT Consortium works to provide access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene to people in Kenya and DRC, and builds capacity to ensure services are sustainable. It is funded with UK aid from the British people.

with the head of the village and the facilitator of the dialogue sessions: typically a community resident with reading and writing skills who has been trained by Africa AHEAD and Tearfund.

Mwavita Wilondja is proud of her position as president of the Matongo Community Health Club, and determined to ensure that the benefits it has brought her village will be sustainable. ‘I was very proud to be elected, and I’m committed to the position because I want to promote the value of women,’ she says.

She believes the weekly meetings provide a valuable forum that is open to the whole community for the discussion of village issues. ‘We can get together regularly to discuss and learn new things, and that’s one of the differences between a club and just attending a session,’ she says.

Mwalihasha Ramazani believes that as she did herself, villagers will increasingly adopt improved sanitation and hygiene behaviours as they witness their neighbours enjoying the benefits. ‘I saw that my neighbour had a clean latrine and compound and I thought: “I want to be like that and follow what they are doing”,’ she explains.

“We have really started to know and care for each other”

Another member, Bilenge Jumdi, is also convinced that Matongo’s transformation will be both lasting and inclusive. ‘If you come back in a year’s time,’ he says, ‘you will see a big difference in the health of the population here. We will have abandoned our old habits and we’ll have new ones that we have learned in the club, and that will mean our families are clean and healthy.’



Francine Mlasi and Community Health Club members

Kashindi Mathiabu sees the benefits stretching well into the future. ‘The knowledge and information I’ve got from the club will continue to be used, as I will pass it on to my children who will grow up with that information, and they will teach their children too,’ she says.