



## CID Talk, Maria Carmelita Francois

WASH Specialist, UNICEF Pacific Multi-Country Office, Fiji

### Why WASH matters

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Carmelita gave a very good overview of the importance of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH), given that safe water is fundamental to life, and access to sanitation has a direct bearing on disease incidence in communities. As health status impacts a person's ability to access and take part in education and economic/livelihoods opportunities, it is quickly evident that WASH programming is essential for community and country wellbeing in all manners of defining it (remembering [last week's CID Talk on how we measure wellbeing](#)). From a medical perspective, water-borne diseases contribute to the low uptake of nutrients in a person's body, leads to stunting and poor brain development, impacting individual contributions to economy.

UNICEF WASH programming works at 4 levels, including creating an enabling environment (baselines and data, policies, government), demand, supply (access including schools and clinics as a human right) and resilience in terms of preparedness, mainstreaming climate change etc.

Challenges for WASH programmes include the impact of climate change, environmental hazards, and the realities of distances and costs in the Pacific, which drive the use of local resources and are a practical incentive for localisation in terms of schools and communities pursuing their own WASH initiatives.

There has been work with ESR on a menu of feasible WASH options for communities to pursue, because what is wanted is not always best practice or best suited to local conditions.

During a lively discussion about taboos in the Pacific around sanitation, Carmelita was clear in the need to have strategies for behaviour change based on both fact and cultural appropriateness. Menstrual hygiene management is mainstreamed in UNICEF's WASH in Schools programming, having learned that raising menstruation as part of a sex education programme can be contentious or offensive on cultural or religious grounds. By approaching the subject through the WASH approach, in terms of the need for clean water for handwashing, the need sanitary products for hygiene, etc. conversations are possible, happening and actually changing behaviours! One very effect driver of behaviour change is competition, for example between schools around international days etc, and the UNICEF star-rating process for schools, or putting simple sign boards outside facilities to highlight and applaud good practice.

There have been pilots of reusable pads and menstrual hygiene management approaches around the Pacific, and we're including some links to studies below. The cup has not yet been piloted or widely approached, nor have tampons, as there are still many issues around the acceptance of those.

[Assessment of Menstrual Hygiene Management in Schools in Fiji](#)  
[Presentation of the findings of MHM in schools in Solomon Islands](#)  
Breaking barriers and taboos from Kiribati ([view here](#))

For more details, please view Carmelita's presentation [here](#), and follow the conversation in upcoming CID Weekly newsletters.