

Promoting Hygiene in IDP settings through Soap-Making Initiatives in the Democratic Republic of Congo

This learning paper examines how soap-making when integrated with hygiene-focused behaviour promotion, contributed to improved access to soap and reinforced handwashing practices in a highly constrained Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) setting.

Context

Handwashing with soap remains one of the most effective measures for reducing the incidence of diarrhoeal and respiratory diseases. According to the WHO, good hand hygiene can reduce deaths from diarrhoeal diseases by 21% and from respiratory infections by 30% among children under five.

The Bulengo IDP site in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has faced wide scale displacement around Goma following intensified conflict between the March 23 Movement (M23) and the Congolese Armed Forces (FARDC). Between March 2022 and December 2024, almost 1.95 million people were displaced, with over 800,000 seeking refuge in IDP sites in Nyiragongo and Goma. This rapid influx placed significant pressure on sanitation facilities and access to basic hygiene items, including soap.

The prolonged insecurity in North Kivu continues to drive displacement and constrain access to essential services. In response, Concern Worldwide's WASH programme (August 2024-February 2025), funded by BHA, in and around Goma was focused on improving access to safe water and sanitation infrastructure, alongside hygiene promotion activities. These include support to latrine management committees, distribution of hygiene items, and community-based behaviour change interventions aimed at reducing the risk of water-borne diseases.

Behavioural Analysis and Hygiene Promotion Approach

To inform the design of hygiene promotion activities, Concern conducted a WASH'EM assessment. WASH'EM is a rapid, evidence-based approach that draws on behavioural science to identify key barriers and enablers influencing hygiene practices in humanitarian contexts. In Bulengo IDP, the assessment highlighted the need for practical, highly visible, and socially reinforced actions to encourage consistent handwashing with soap.

Based on the WASH'EM recommendations and the local context, Concern implemented three complementary hygiene promotion activities.

1. Painted footprints were placed from latrines to handwashing points to act as a visual cue and nudge latrine users to wash their hands immediately after use.
2. Testimonies from community members who had experienced water-borne diseases were shared to make health risks more tangible and locally relevant.

3. Practical demonstrations showed that washing hands with water alone is insufficient to remove germs, while soap effectively breaks down and removes contamination, reinforcing the necessity of soap for effective hand hygiene.

Project Implementation and Rationale for Soap-Making

The activities were implemented under the MAC project (Multi-sectoral Assistance to Communities), funded by USAID under the Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance (BHA), which aimed to address urgent humanitarian needs through integrated WASH, protection, and basic services interventions in displacement settings.

Despite ongoing hygiene promotion efforts, access to soap remained a persistent challenge in Bulengo due to cost, supply constraints, and competing household priorities. To address this gap and ensure the sustained availability of soap, Concern organised a soap-making training as part of the MAC project. This initiative aimed to compliment behaviour change activities by enabling local production of soap, reducing reliance on external distributions, and supporting both communal latrine maintenance and household hygiene practices.

Objectives

- To enable IDPs to acquire practical soap-making skills to become self-sufficient and to meet their basic hygiene needs.
- Teach the use of local and sustainable resources for soap making, thereby reducing reliance on external supplies.
- Raise awareness of the importance of soap washing and the correct use of hygiene products to improve public health.
- Provide participants with the necessary materials and equipment for soap making following training.

Methodology of Implementation

The soap-making activity was designed to complement hygiene promotion efforts by addressing barriers related to the availability and affordability of soap. Training sessions combined practical demonstrations with hands-on practice, allowing participants to learn each step of the soap-making process through observation and direct participation. Emphasis was placed on the use of locally available inputs where possible, alongside basic safety measures related to handling materials and heating processes.

The training approach prioritised simplicity and replicability. Technical concepts were explained using non-specialist language, and repeated practice was encouraged to build confidence and reduce errors. Soap produced during the training was immediately used in communal latrines and handwashing points, reinforcing the link between soap production, hygiene promotion, and daily hygiene practices.

- Below are the minimum materials and equipment used for soap production that are available in the local markets:

Medium-sized cooking pots, firewood, basins, jerrycans or packaging containers, wooden spatulas, shelves, tables, protective goggles, jugs, empty bottles or 1 litre containers, gloves, face masks, plastic chairs, knives, soap molds or tarpaulins (for shaping the soap), leg guards (boots), weighing scale, aprons, kitchen spoons, stickers or labels and drums (barrels).

- Below are the minimum consumables required for soap production that are available in the local markets:

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Palm oil, palm kernel oil, caustic soda (sodium hydroxide), fragrance (various grades/qualities), sulphonic acid (linear alkylbenzene sulphonate Acid–LABSA), texapon/ moussan (Ungalo) (sodium lauryl ether sulfate/ SLES), industrial salt, urea, CDE or KDS (coconut diethanolamine/detergent additive), toilet formaldehyde/ formalin, colorants (various grades and colours), sodium carbonate (soda ash), titanium dioxide, CMC or nitrosol (carboxymethyl cellulose), EDTA (ethylenediaminetetraacetic acid), chemical glycerine, SLS (sodium lauryl sulfate), sodium benzoate, aloe vera extract, sorbitol, citric acid.

Conduct of the Training

The training focused on the manufacture of KIFEBE soap, as this is the most used soap for handwashing and personal hygiene in the city of Goma, including within the Bulengo IDP site.

A total of 140 participants were trained. To facilitate effective learning, participants were divided into four groups, with each group receiving three days of training. The sessions covered the identification and use of raw materials for soap production, the soap-making process itself, and basic information on pricing, noting that each bar of soap could be sold for approximately 200 Congolese francs on the local market.

To support the continuation of soap production after the training, Concern provided participants with essential raw materials and soap-making equipment. This support aimed to enable displaced participants to continue producing soap independently, both for use in communal facilities and for sale within the site, thereby strengthening access to soap while supporting small-scale income generation.

Participants and Community Structures

Participants were selected from existing community structures within the Bulengo IDP site to strengthen ownership and sustainability. These included members of the latrine management committees (COGELA) and representatives of site leadership structures, who were already responsible for overseeing sanitation facilities and mobilising community members around hygiene practices.

Both women and men participated in the training, reflecting the shared responsibility for hygiene and communal facility maintenance within the site. Involving individuals already engaged in WASH-related roles (site latrine management committees) helped ensure that the soap-making activity was immediately integrated into ongoing hygiene management and promotion efforts.

Lessons Learned

Discussions at organisational level highlighted that soap-making initiatives require careful consideration of both economic viability and safety. Key constraints included fluctuating prices of raw materials, limited access to caustic soda outside urban centres, and the need for appropriate protective equipment during production. Simplifying technical concepts during training and ensuring clear guidance on safe practices were essential to enable replication in a constrained humanitarian setting. Where soap-making is intended to contribute to income generation, attention to basic marketing elements such as packaging and product identification was identified as important to sustaining demand alongside hygiene outcomes.

Participant feedback highlighted the perceived added value of the activity within the broader WASH response. Participants noted that, while many organisations were active in WASH programming at the site, soap-making training had not previously been offered. They emphasised that the activity improved their ability to access soap on a regular basis and created opportunities to generate small amounts of income through sales within the site.

Following the training, participants began producing soap consistently, and communal latrines were regularly supplied to promote handwashing after toilet use. Locally produced soap was also sold within the site at a lower price than market alternatives, improving access for households with limited purchasing power.

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While the initial production cycle was successful in terms of sales and uptake, a second cycle could not be implemented due to the dispersion of production committee members following the escalation of the crisis. Procurement processes for additional materials had been initiated but could not be finalised before hostilities intensified. As a result, trained participants were scattered across different locations, limiting continuity of the activity. Despite these constraints, the initiative was well received and demonstrated the potential for soap-making to complement hygiene promotion in displacement settings.

Recommendations

- The participants recommended that Concern advocate with the state authorities to exempt them from taxes when making and selling soap. They also recommended that Concern purchase locally produced soap for inclusion in household and personal hygiene kit distributions (including soap for handwashing and laundry). This was proposed in anticipation of future distributions; however, Concern could not pilot this approach due to the outbreak of fighting, which limited implementation of the initiative.
- Extend soap-making training to other IDPs to facilitate the permanence of soaps in IDP sites.
- Hygiene promotion activities should be paired with practical solutions that address access to soap, particularly in settings where cost and availability remain major barriers.
- Soap-making initiatives should be framed primarily as a hygiene support mechanism rather than a stand-alone livelihood activity, to maintain focus on disease prevention outcomes.
- Engaging latrine management committees and site leadership structures supports ownership, sustainability, and immediate application of soap-making outputs for communal facilities.
- Training should emphasise safe handling of materials and use simplified, non-technical explanations to ensure replication in resource-constrained and high-risk environments.
- Tools such as WASH'EM should continue to guide the design of hygiene promotion activities, ensuring that interventions respond to locally identified barriers and enablers.

Testimonials

Originally from Mayi Moya, Masika fled her village with her three children because of repeated incursions by an armed group. *“They killed people and burned houses for three consecutive days. Before, there had already been repeated clashes and we would move temporarily, but this time we decided to relocate to Beni for good.”*

“With Concern, we have already received a lot of support to rebuild our livelihoods. Personally, I completed training in soap-making and received monthly cash transfers to help us survive. I am now able to produce different types of soap: toilet soap, liquid soap, and bar soap for dishwashing. Last week, I bought a mould to start producing my own soap at home. I sell one bar for 2,500 or 3,000 CDF (around 1 GBP), depending on the quality and shape. My hope for the future is to one day build my own small soap factory. That would allow me to prosper and forget everything that happened to us.” Masika is not only rebuilding an income she is gradually restoring her stability, her confidence, and the hope of a safer future for her children.



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In 2025, more than 27 million people in the DRC, nearly one-third of the population, will require humanitarian assistance. Around 15% of them are persons with disabilities, whose specific needs are frequently overlooked. Ensuring their inclusion in programmes is critical for access to essential services and for reinforcing community resilience.

Kyakimwa resides in the Ndini neighbourhood of Beni, where she sought refuge after fleeing her village. She is the mother of one child and cares for six nieces and nephews. As a displaced woman with reduced mobility, her daily life was particularly challenging, especially during the early months of displacement.



“We had to rely on the help of kind-hearted people, but when Concern arrived, I received support, including training in income-generating activities (IGA) and literacy. I then chose soap-making because it is an accessible activity, easy to sell, and does not require much physical effort. Today, I produce and gradually sell my batches of soap. These interventions have had a real and lasting impact on my life. My life has completely changed. I now believe in my abilities and in my future.”

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