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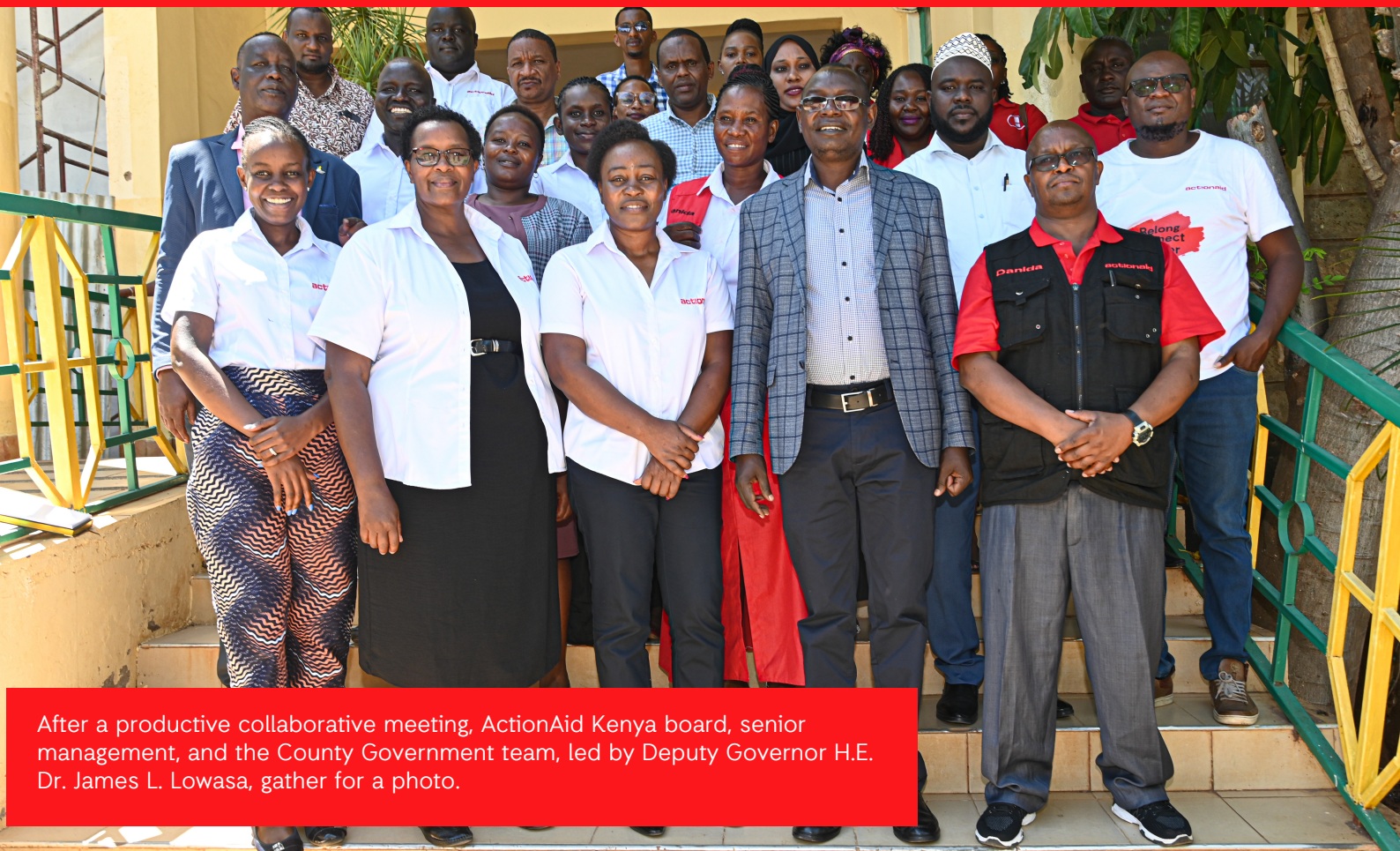
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ActionAid Kenya and Isiolo County Government Unite for Women and Girls' Rights



After a productive collaborative meeting, ActionAid Kenya board, senior management, and the County Government team, led by Deputy Governor H.E. Dr. James L. Lowasa, gather for a photo.

On 21st May 2024, the board and senior management team of ActionAid Kenya convened with Isiolo County Government officials, led by Deputy Governor H.E. Dr. James L. Lowasa. The meeting served as a platform to discuss ongoing and future initiatives that will positively impact the lives of residents in Isiolo County.

Key Areas of Focus:

Advancing Women and Girls' Rights

ActionAid Kenya is unwavering in its commitment to advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls in Isiolo. Through targeted programmes, the organization aims to improve access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities, and protect girls from harmful practices like FGM.

Strengthening Climate Resilience

Recognizing the challenges posed by climate change, both ActionAid Kenya and its partners in the county government are collaborating to implement initiatives that enhance resilience and promote sustainable livelihoods. These efforts include advocating for climate-smart policies, supporting conservation practices, and empowering small-scale farmers.



ActionAid Kenya and Isiolo County Government join forces to advance women and girls' rights, foster climate resilience, nurture youth leadership, and eradicate FGM..

Nurturing Youth Leadership

ActionAid Kenya and the Isiolo County Government are joining forces to foster youth leadership and participation in decision-making processes. Through training, mentorship, and providing platforms for engagement, young people will be empowered to drive community development initiatives and become agents of positive change.

Eradicating FGM

Addressing the harmful practice of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a top priority for both ActionAid Kenya and the Isiolo County Government. Through targeted awareness campaigns, community sensitization, and robust support for survivors, the aim is to eliminate FGM and safeguard the rights and dignity of girls.

"We are delighted to partner with ActionAid Kenya in our efforts to improve the well-being of our residents. Together, we will work tirelessly to address key challenges facing our communities." H.E. Dr. James L. Lowasa, Deputy Governor of Isiolo County

"Our collaboration with the Isiolo County Government represents a significant step forward in our mission to promote social justice and sustainable development. By joining forces, we can achieve greater impact and create lasting change." Susan Otieno, Executive Director at ActionAid Kenya

The partnership between ActionAid Kenya and the Isiolo County Government heralds a promising era of progress in building a more equitable and resilient society. Through collective action and shared commitment, we are poised to make tangible strides in advancing women and girls' rights, strengthening climate resilience, nurturing youth leadership, and ending harmful practices like FGM in Isiolo County.



H.E. Dr. James L. Lowasa, Deputy Governor of Isiolo County hosts the ActionAid Team at the County Offices on 21st May 2024

Do Not Commercialize Public Service, CSOs Tell Government.



Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) gather at the 2024 UN Climate Summit Conference (UNCSC) pre-event held on May 7, 2024, in Nairobi,

Civil society organizations (CSOs) from around the world gathered in Nairobi to deliberate on the state of public service in Africa ahead of the 2024 United Nations Civil Society Conference (UNCSC), set to take place in Kenya's capital on May 9-10. The forum addressed the pressing issue of public service commercialization and its adverse effects on citizens, particularly in Kenya.

In the last four decades, Africa and Kenya in particular has experienced a surge in the privatization of public services by governments, often to the detriment of the populace. Participants at the Nairobi meeting highlighted critical areas including education, health, water, tax, and climate change mitigation.

Kenyan delegates noted that the commercialization of public services has disproportionately impacted indigenous communities. Irene Asuwa from the Nairobi Water Network articulated the broader implications:

"Public service systems form the backbone of our society, supporting the private sector. If these systems are skewed, the provision and affordability of every other service dependent on public services will be compromised."



Boaz Waruku, a member of the Elimu Bora Working Group speaking during the 2024 UNCSC pre-event held on May 7, 2024, in Nairobi.

Chronic underfunding, lack of political will, and pervasive corruption were identified as significant obstacles to the efficient delivery of public services. Many individuals convicted or implicated in corruption cases seek political positions to evade accountability, further hindering public service efficacy.

Boaz Waruku of the Elimu Bora Working Group described the dire state of public services in Kenya:

“The public service is in total disarray, whether in education, water, health, or social care. Many functional components are privately managed. The government has largely abandoned its role in education, forcing Kenyans to rely on private schools that claim to offer superior services, which is not necessarily true.”

Salome Terah of DACE Nairobi suggested that the government should regulate the fees charged by private schools, acknowledging their integral role in the current educational landscape.

Everline Aketch, Education Support & Cultural Workers Officer and Sub-regional Secretary for English-Speaking Africa at Public Service International, commended ActionAid for its research on education in Africa, which paints a bleak picture of the continent’s public services.

“Public services have become conduits for profit rather than service provision. Corruption has been institutionalized, with prices for basic items often grossly inflated during procurement. The lack of political will is evident in the collapse of Edu-Afya, a medical insurance cover for students, as politicians involved in the insurance industry prioritize profits over affordable services,” Waruku added.



Everline Aketch of Public Service International during the 2024 UNCSC pre-event held on May 7, 2024, in Nairobi.



Lina Moraa, Women's Rights and Governance Manager at ActionAid International Kenya, stated:

"We sensitize the community on gender-responsive public service (GRPS) budgeting and empower them to constructively engage with the government to ensure these services are adequately provided."

"We also build community capacity to lead campaigns for GRPS, focusing on climate change, education, tax, water, and health. The communities we work with are involved in the Tax Justice and Climate Justice campaigns, among others. Public service must be subject to democratic accountability," added Moraa.

The UNCSC pre-event included CSOs such as ActionAid International Kenya, ISER Uganda, Oxfam, EACHRight, HakiiJamii, Nairobi Water Network, Maduira Institute Pum/ Kenya, Public Services International, Tax Justice Network, Global Alliance for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Akina Mama Wa Afrika, People's Health Movement Kenya, Angry Alliance, Yali Kenya, Okoa Uchumi, Global Campaign for Education, URAIA, CLADE, and WETEC Kenya. The Kenyan government was represented by the Ministry of Education and the National Hospital Insurance Fund (NHIF).

As CSOs and government representatives convene, the call to halt the commercialization of public services and ensure their efficient, equitable delivery remains more critical than ever.

The public service sector has also faced significant resource cutbacks. In 2023, 37 percent of the school capitation approved by parliament was not disbursed, yet there was no accountability.

Despite these challenges, county governments in Kenya are making efforts to improve public services. Participants suggested that strengthening county governments by providing them with timely resources and connecting them with partners could enhance their capacity to deliver basic services.

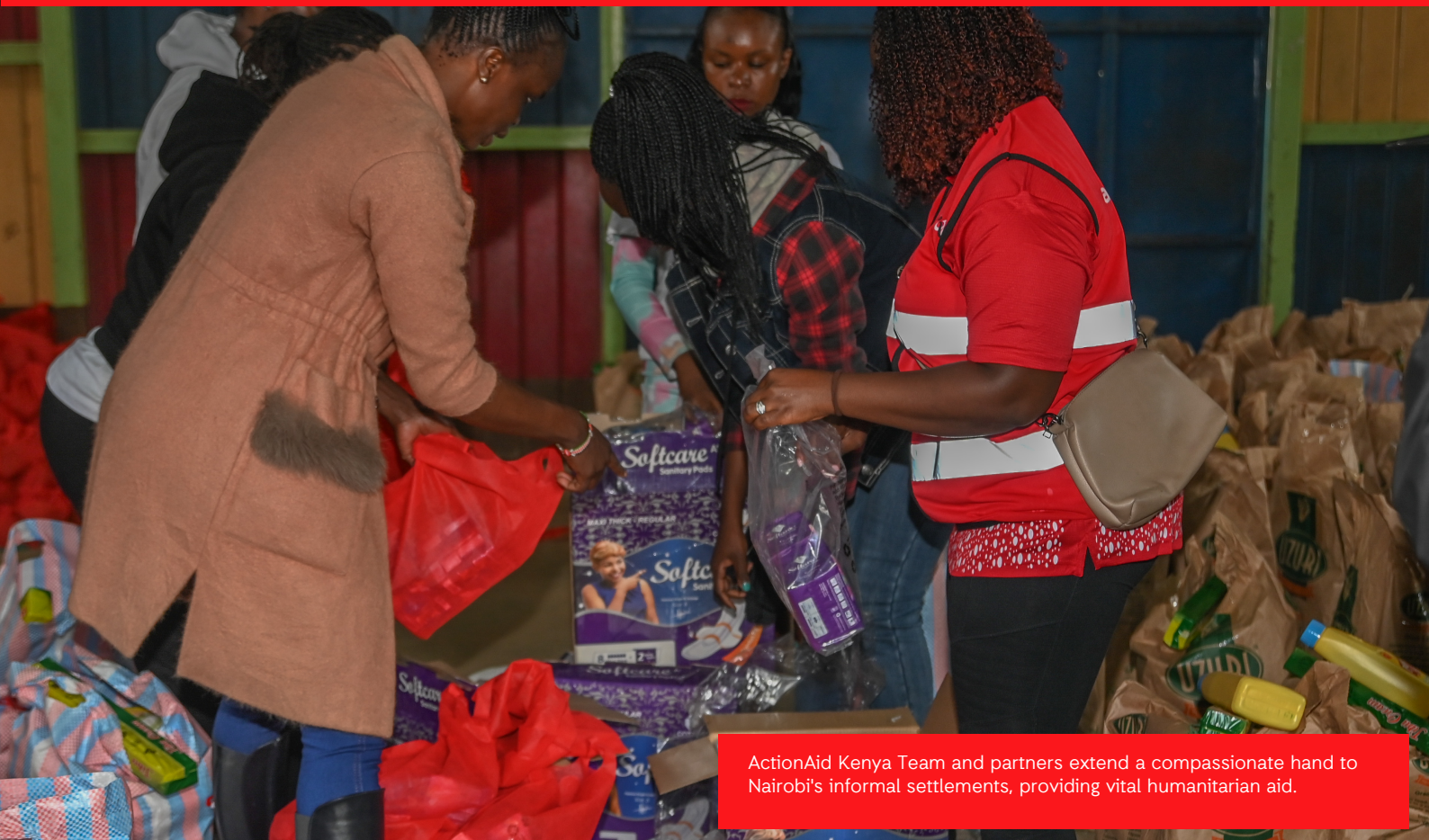
The healthcare sector faces similar issues. Private hospitals often leverage public hospital infrastructure to offer medical services, resulting in slow service delivery and long queues in public hospitals. This situation forces patients to seek urgent care in expensive private facilities, only to be referred back to public hospitals for swift service.

Waruku criticized Kenyan leaders and politicians, many of whom do not use public schools or hospitals:

"Why would they be interested in managing these facilities when their personal preferences lie elsewhere?"

Transforming this situation requires the vigilance of the public and CSOs to ensure accountability in resource allocation. ActionAid Kenya plays a crucial role in this effort by building the capacity of both duty bearers (government officials) and rights holders (communities).

The Hidden Strain: Psychological Stress and Menstrual Health During Emergencies



ActionAid Kenya Team and partners extend a compassionate hand to Nairobi's informal settlements, providing vital humanitarian aid.

Disasters bring about significant challenges, including death, injury, destruction, and a profound erosion of dignity. These stressors lead to numerous physical and emotional health issues. This article delves into the specific impact of psychological stress on women's menstrual health during the catastrophic April and May 2024 floods in Kenya, focusing on the Majengo informal settlements in Nairobi.

In April and early May 2024, Kenya experienced unprecedented cloudbursts, causing severe floods and flash floods. These events led to multiple deaths, widespread destruction, and significant displacement. The Majengo informal settlements were severely affected, with homes submerged and families displaced. Women in these areas faced extreme stress, disrupting their menstrual cycles, and increasing their vulnerability.

Psychological and Physical Impact

The floods inflicted severe distress on women, who suddenly had to secure essential resources like food, shelter, clothing, and menstrual hygiene products for themselves and their families. Zelpher Ingasiah, a Majengo resident, recounted:

“Following the heavy rains in April and May, we experienced floods for the first time in our lives. Many women’s stress levels skyrocketed. Our household items, including food, clothes, dignity packs, and shoes, were submerged or washed away. Structures in the neighborhood crumbled, triggering our menstrual cycles. Some women got their periods earlier than scheduled.”

This urgent need to rebuild their lives left women struggling to allocate funds for menstrual products, essential for health and hygiene. Young girls found it particularly difficult to request these products from parents already strained by the need to provide necessities.

Humanitarian Response

Initial humanitarian efforts primarily focused on evacuation and providing blankets and food. However, ActionAid Kenya and our partner Youth Alive Kenya recognized the critical need for menstrual hygiene products, supplying dignity kits alongside food and non-food items. This support significantly helped preserve women’s dignity and hygiene. Ingasiah expressed her gratitude:

“While other humanitarian responses focused on evacuation, giving out blankets, and some food donations, we are glad that ActionAid Kenya and Youth Alive Kenya provided menstrual hygiene products. This went a long way in helping us observe menstrual hygiene and preserving our dignity.”

Vulnerability of Teenage Mothers

Teenage mothers were among the most affected, facing unique challenges due to their age and financial struggles. These young mothers needed both sanitary pads and diapers for their babies. The lack of access to menstrual hygiene products increased their susceptibility to manipulation and exploitation, potentially leading to higher rates of teen pregnancies and exposure to dangerous situations such as drug abuse and criminal activities. Ingasiah highlighted the importance of including hygiene kits in humanitarian responses to mitigate these risks:

“With humanitarian response providing hygiene kits, this alleviates the dire situation of susceptibility of teenage mothers to manipulation that leads them to fall prey in their quest to acquire safe sanitary alternatives to use during their periods.”

Conclusion

Kenya’s susceptibility to natural disasters like floods, droughts, and landslides underscores the necessity for comprehensive disaster response strategies. These strategies must address both the immediate and long-term needs of affected populations. Providing menstrual hygiene products during emergencies is crucial for maintaining women’s health and dignity, reducing stress, and preventing exploitation.



Recommendations

Incorporate Menstrual Hygiene into Disaster Relief:

Humanitarian organizations should consistently include menstrual hygiene products in their emergency relief packages.

Support for Teenage Mothers: Special attention should be given to the unique needs of teenage mothers, providing both sanitary pads and baby diapers.

Community Education: Raise awareness about the importance of menstrual hygiene and the impact of stress on menstrual cycles to better prepare communities for future disasters.

Policy Advocacy: Advocate for policies that ensure the inclusion of menstrual hygiene management in national disaster preparedness and response plans.

By addressing these needs, humanitarian efforts can more effectively support the health and dignity of women and girls during emergencies, contributing to their resilience and recovery.

Mwanajuma's Fight for Her Family's Future.



Mwanajuma (R) along with her daughter (L) and grandchild, engages with ActionAid Kenya's Project Coordinator Zamzam Hassan (C) in Kamuthe, Fafi Sub County, Garissa County

Mwanajuma Islam, a widow and mother of five children from Kamuthe in Nanighi ward, Fafi Sub-County, Garissa County, epitomizes resilience in the face of adversity. Widowed and left to fend for her three daughters and two sons, Mwanajuma's story is one of determination, struggle, and eventual empowerment through community support.

Mwanajuma's life took a drastic turn after the death of her husband. The cultural practice of widow inheritance, where a widow is expected to marry a male relative of her deceased husband, posed a significant challenge. Mwanajuma's refusal to be inherited complicated her access to her husband's dues, leaving her in a precarious financial situation. To sustain her family, she relied on basket weaving and simple tailoring, working tirelessly to make ends meet.

"When my husband died, I struggled to get his dues from his place of work where he worked as a night guard. The reason for this was that his clan would not allow me to access his death certificate because I refused to be inherited by one of his clansmen. This hurt me, but with assistance from the Kamuthe Women's Rights Network, I was able to get an audience with the chief. After listening to my case, I got the chance to get the certificate and claim my husband's dues of KES 20,000," recounts Mwanajuma Islam.



Mwanajuma weaving mats to sell for an income to support her family

The challenges Mwanajuma faced extended to her children, manifesting in her eldest daughter's plight. At the tender age of 15, her daughter became pregnant, prompting her to drop out of school. Hastily, she was married off while still in class seven. The child's marriage led to severe complications during pregnancy, exacerbated by her young age and the physical and emotional demands of childbirth, further compounding their struggles.

After two years of her daughter staying at home and returning from the unsuccessful marriage, Mwanajuma made a pivotal decision. She sought support from the Kamuthe Women's Rights Network, an organization dedicated to empowering women in her community. This empowerment and support network provided Mwanajuma with the knowledge and courage to take decisive action for her daughter's future.

Realizing the disadvantages her daughter faced due to child marriage and pregnancy, Mwanajuma was determined to ensure her child received an education. She brought her back home and re-enrolled her daughter in school, and today, she is proudly in Form 1 at secondary school. This is even after committing to raise the baby on behalf of her daughter.

"I was very challenged as I desired her (her daughter) to go back to school and realize her dreams. I believe that after her school, she will get a job and be able to support her kid and the family," Mwanajuma reflects.

Her words highlight the hope and aspirations she holds for her daughter's future, a future where education paves the way for better opportunities and a break from the cycle of poverty.

Mwanajuma Islam's story is a testament to the power of resilience and the importance of community support in overcoming life's adversities. Despite facing significant cultural and economic challenges, Mwanajuma's unwavering determination to provide a better life for her children stands as an inspiring example.

Through the empowerment and resources provided by the Kamuthe Women's Rights Network, Mwanajuma's actions not only transformed her daughter's life but also set a precedent for other women in her community to follow. Her journey underscores the critical need for continued support and empowerment initiatives for women, particularly in rural and underserved areas. By investing in the education and empowerment of women and girls, communities can break the cycles of poverty and disadvantage, fostering a brighter and more equitable future for all.

Kamuthe Women's Rights Network is a sub-guarantee of ActionAid Kenya's Women's Rights Programme, supported by Irish Aid through ActionAid Ireland.

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