

Egypt

Empowered for good: Children in Upper Egypt change environment and sanitation habits

Perhaps owing to her innate elegance, her peers refer to 10-year-old Fatima, from Tawayel El-Sharqiyya as a future leader. Her words are strong, as are her positions on the urgent need to protect the environment. At her young age, she has started to write poetry, and though her themes are varied, among her commitments is to improve environmental awareness in her school and amongst the village community. 'I have learned a lot about how to keep the environment safe at school. Now, whenever I meet a child who doesn't take care of the environment, I feel sorry for him, and I try and tell him ways to change his habits.'

Like the primary school children of 373 primary schools in Assiut, Sohag and Qena governorates, Fatima has directly benefited from UNICEF's School Sanitation and Hygiene Education (SSHE) project, which was launched last year. And because of the close-knit nature of the communities in Upper Egyptian villages and towns, the impact of the project has been manifold, and profound.

That the programme has taken a holistic, participatory approach goes a long way in explaining the reasons behind its success. Over 1,400 schoolteachers received training on how to effectively deliver messages relating to the environment, sanitation and hygiene to pupils, both within the context

of the subjects they teach and beyond. Those who received training then went on to involve other members of school staff by informing them on how to implement these important messages.



Fatima, from Tawayel El Sharqiyya in Sohag

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For some children much of the information relating to environmental awareness was no doubt new. But in many cases, given the rural nature of Upper Egypt, the programme had the advantage of enforcing a pre-existing respect for nature. 'Now, when I see people throwing things away on the streets, I tell them not to do that,' said 13-year-old Islam, who goes to school in Zarazra Elementary School, Sohag. With confidence in his knowledge enforced, his self-respect has also risen. 'Being so





More trees were planted in the school grounds in Zarzara.

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involved in the project on environmental awareness, I have also become more focused on my studies. I think this is because when you are good at one thing, you want to try your best in other things too.'

Through the use of art and outdoor activities including tree-planting on the school grounds and in the villages, children directly participated in their own education

'If we are clean then we face a lower risk of disease,' said Islam. 'I believe fully in what we are doing for ourselves, and for the environment. I can see the whole town has benefited, and we must continue with our work.'

and also in the broader context of public community life. 'We planted trees outside, and this made us feel very good,' Islam said proudly.

Simultaneously, UNICEF provided the technical and financial support to rehabilitate both bathroom and sink facilities

in the target public schools, and thereby made it possible for children to have access to the facilities that would help them practice better hygiene. 'So we taught the kids a number of different things, such as the need to wash their hands after going to the bathroom,' said teacher Safaa Sadeq at Zarzara Elementary. 'Then they started to implement those basic messages at home too, and we knew then the change was for good.' Growing up in Upper Egypt, the children of the target regions may well be amongst

the country's poorest and thereby in many ways most marginal. However, that the children of Upper Egypt have become capable of taking the lead on sanitation and environmental issues has empowered them for life, with the Ministry of Education taking the lead at the grassroots level to help improve conditions for the school children and communities.

'The Egyptian Government's commitment has been crucial for the success that has been achieved so far' said Dr. Vijayakumar Moses, Chief of Young Child Survival and Development Section at UNICEF Egypt. 'We believe that what these children have learnt from being involved in this project will contribute to their development and help them live healthier and more productive lives.'



School children wash their hands before lunch time, in Zarzara school

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Case Study #1