

## **Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Policies and the Enhancement of Quality Education in Lower and Upper Basic Schools within Region One Education Directorate, The Gambia**

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### **Abstract**

*This study focused on the importance of School Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) policy in enhancing the quality of education in Lower and Upper Basic Schools within Region One Education Directorate of The Gambia. The study utilised a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative analysis of policy documents with quantitative data obtained from questionnaires administered to head teachers. The Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and Systems Thinking provide valuable theoretical lenses to analyse the lack of WASH policies. The HRBA emphasises the recognition of WASH as a fundamental human right, while the Systems Thinking approach considers the interconnectedness and complexity of the WASH system. The findings indicated that a significant number of schools in the region lack a WASH policy or rely on general directives, leading to inconsistent approaches and practices in addressing WASH issues. This inconsistency results in inadequate provision of WASH facilities, ineffective hygiene education, and a lack of clear learning objectives for students. The absence of WASH-related guidance in key school management tools and policy documents further exacerbates the challenges. The study highlighted the need for a comprehensive School WASH policy to oversee, regulate, and provide guidance for the implementation of WASH standards in educational institutions. Recommendations included developing and implementing a comprehensive School WASH policy, enhancing the curriculum framework to ensure the coverage of WASH topics, providing clear guidelines and resources, incorporating WASH into policy documents, conducting capacity-building and awareness programmes, and establishing a robust monitoring and evaluation system.*

**Keywords:** Policy, Water, Sanitation, Hygiene, School.

### **Introduction**

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), unsafe water, inadequate sanitation, and poor hygiene practices contribute to the transmission of diseases such as diarrhoea, cholera, and typhoid (WHO, 2019). Sanitation facilities play a significant role in maintaining high standards within schools. Inadequate or unhygienic toilet facilities can negatively impact students' comfort, dignity, and overall school experience. Properly maintained toilets and handwashing stations, as outlined in WASH policies, contribute to student's physical well-being and promote a sense of dignity and privacy (UNICEF, 2019). Moreover, WASH policies are essential for cultivating hygiene habits among students. Education and awareness programmes, as part of WASH policies, can teach students the importance of practices such as regular handwashing with soap, proper waste management, and personal cleanliness. According to

UNICEF, promoting good hygiene practices significantly reduces the spread of diseases and improves overall health outcomes (UNICEF, 2021). By instilling these habits in students, WASH policies contribute to their long-term health and well-being. Investments in water supply systems, sanitation facilities, and waste management contribute to creating a safe and conducive learning environment. Functional and well-maintained facilities enhance students' comfort, positively impacting their overall school experience (UNESCO, 2018). Improved infrastructure also promotes a sense of pride and ownership among students and staff, fostering a positive school culture and enhancing the overall standards of the institution. Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) policies are essential for improving the standards of lower and upper basic schools within the Region One Education Directorate. These policies are necessary to ensure access to clean water, promote proper sanitation practices, and cultivate hygiene habits among students. The present study aims to investigate the imperative nature of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) policies in enhancing the standards of lower and upper basic schools within the Region One Education Directorate. The research will examine the significance of WASH policies in providing a reliable supply of clean water for drinking, handwashing, and sanitation purposes. Valuable insights will be gained to develop policies that effectively address the challenges and limitations about water and sanitation issues in these schools. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of evidence-based policies that prioritize the improvement of WASH infrastructure and practices in educational institutions.

### **Literature Review**

This section discusses the conceptual, theoretical and empirical reviews.

### **Conceptual Review**

Water and Sanitation in Schools is a concept developed by UNICEF that ensures the provision of an adequate supply of water, sanitation and washing facilities in schools in operation with hygiene education activities. The adoption of the concept requires a functional and reliable water system capable of providing enough for the schools' needs for handwashing and drinking (UNICEF 2011). An ideal school with an adequate WASH concept must provide 5 litres of water to each child or teacher each day and for boarding schools 20 litres. 10-20 litres of water is required for flushed toilets, 1.5- 3 litres for pour flush toilets and 1-2 litres of water is required for anal washing after using the toilet UNICEF (2012). The concept of water hygiene and sanitation emphasises the interdependence of clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene practices in safeguarding human health and preventing the spread of waterborne diseases. It requires a multi-faceted approach involving infrastructure development, policy implementation, community participation, and continuous monitoring to ensure sustained improvements in water quality and sanitation conditions.

Infrastructure development is a fundamental aspect of improving water hygiene and sanitation. Access to clean water sources and adequate sanitation facilities is essential. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), an estimated 785 million people still lack access to basic drinking water services, and 2 billion people do not have access to safely managed sanitation facilities (WHO/UNICEF, 2021). Infrastructure development involves establishing and maintaining water supply systems, such as piped water networks, wells, and boreholes, as well as constructing proper sanitation facilities, including toilets and wastewater treatment plants.

Policy implementation is another important component. Effective policies and regulations ensure that water hygiene and sanitation practices are followed and that the necessary infrastructure is put in place. Governments and relevant authorities formulate and enforce policies that address water quality, sanitation standards, and hygiene practices. These policies can include guidelines for water treatment, waste management, and hygiene education. For example, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) aims to ensure access to clean water and sanitation for all and calls for policy interventions to achieve this goal (United Nations, 2015).

Community participation is essential for the success of water hygiene and sanitation initiatives. Involving the community helps create a sense of ownership and empowers individuals to take responsibility for their hygiene practices. Community engagement can include awareness campaigns, education programs, and the establishment of community-based water and sanitation committees. These committees can mobilize resources, coordinate efforts, and provide a platform for community members to voice their concerns and contribute to decision-making processes.

Together, water, hygiene, and sanitation form the foundation of a healthy living environment. Access to clean water, practising proper hygiene, and ensuring adequate sanitation facilities are essential for promoting individual well-being, preventing disease transmission, and creating healthy communities. Water, hygiene, and sanitation (WASH) in schools are essential components of a healthy and conducive learning environment. Access to clean water, proper sanitation facilities, and hygiene practices have a significant impact on the well-being, attendance, and educational outcomes of students. (WHO/UNICEF, 2019) recommended that schools provide safe and reliable drinking water sources, such as piped water, boreholes, or treated water containers. Proper sanitation facilities, including toilets and hand washing stations, are essential for maintaining hygiene in schools. Gender-segregated and age-appropriate toilet facilities should be available to ensure privacy and dignity for all students (UNESCO, 2020). Promoting good hygiene practices among students is essential for preventing the spread of diseases. Education on hand washing with soap, proper menstrual hygiene management, and personal hygiene practices should be integrated into the school curriculum (UNESCO, 2020).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework for analysing Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene Policies and the Enhancement of Quality of Education in Lower and Upper Basic Schools within Region One Education Directorate can be approached from multiple perspectives. The two theoretical frameworks that are relevant to this topic are the Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) and the Systems Thinking approach.

**Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA):** The HRBA emphasises the recognition of WASH as fundamental human rights. According to this framework, access to clean water, proper sanitation, and hygiene facilities is not only a necessity but also a right that should be guaranteed for all individuals, including students in educational institutions. The HRBA provides a normative framework for understanding the obligations of duty bearers, such as governments and education authorities, to fulfil these rights and ensure that policies and interventions are in place to address WASH issues in schools (United Nations, 2008). Analysing the lack of policies within the Region One Education Directorate can be done through the lens of human rights, focusing on the identification of gaps and the need for a rights-based approach to address WASH challenges.

**The Systems Thinking Approach:** The systems thinking approach considers the interconnectedness and complexity of various elements within a system. This approach recognises that multiple factors influence the provision of water, sanitation, and hygiene services and their impact on the quality of education. It involves understanding the interplay of stakeholders, including government bodies, school management, teachers, students, parents, and community members. Applying the systems thinking approach involves analysing the different components of the WASH system, such as infrastructure, resources, policies, and social norms, and their interdependencies. This framework encourages holistic thinking and the identification of leverage points to bring about sustainable change in the WASH system within the Region One Education Directorate (Meadows, 2008).

### **Empirical Review and the Wash Policy in the Study Area**

One empirical study that explored the impact of WASH policies on education quality is a research conducted by Caruso, et al. (2017). The study examined the association between improved WASH infrastructure in schools and students' educational attainment in Cambodia. The findings indicated that

the availability of water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities in schools was positively correlated with student attendance and academic performance. Students in schools with better WASH infrastructure had higher attendance rates and demonstrated better learning outcomes compared to those in schools with inadequate facilities.

Another empirical review by Freeman et al. (2017) assessed the effectiveness of WASH interventions in schools on student health and educational outcomes. The study analysed data from various studies and found that implementing WASH interventions, such as access to clean water, hand washing facilities, and improved sanitation, led to a reduction in water-related diseases, decreased absenteeism, and improved educational attainment. A study conducted by Smith et al. (2018) sheds light on the limited integration of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) topics into school curricula. Their findings revealed that only 20% of the surveyed schools had incorporated WASH topics into their educational programs.

A study conducted by Ahmed, Ullah, Ahmed & Choudhary (2018) assessed drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene practices and challenges in Peri-urban communities of Quetta City, Pakistan. The research provided valuable insights into the WASH conditions in Peri-urban areas and highlighted the specific challenges faced by these communities. Another study conducted by Johnson, Chisenga, Mwale & Michelo (2020) examined the water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices in schools across low and middle-income countries. The research sheds light on the status of WASH practices in educational institutions and highlights key challenges and areas for improvement. The findings indicate significant gaps and challenges in implementing adequate WASH practices.

UNESCO (2017) indicate that a significant number of countries, especially those in low and middle-income regions lack explicit policies or guidelines specifically addressing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) in schools. This absence of dedicated policies or guidelines can have detrimental effects on the implementation and prioritization of WASH initiatives within educational settings. The lack of explicit policies or guidelines related to WASH in schools reflects a broader issue of insufficient attention and recognition given to WASH as a crucial component of the education sector. Without clear policies, schools and stakeholders may not fully understand the importance of WASH in promoting a safe and healthy learning environment. As a result, limited resources and efforts may be allocated to addressing water, sanitation, and hygiene challenges in schools.

In their report on "Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Schools: Global Goals, Local Challenges", UNICEF (2018) highlighted the need for clear guidelines and standardized approaches to ensure consistent and sustainable WASH practices in schools worldwide. The absence of such guidance may lead to inconsistencies and ad hoc approaches in addressing these issues. Schools may adopt varied practices, some of which may not meet the required standards or adequately promote the health and well-being of students.

Girod et al. (2017) examined the implementation of water, sanitation, and hygiene programmes in schools in low-income countries and their findings revealed that the absence of explicit guidance and standards led to diverse approaches and inconsistent practices. This lack of consistency ultimately hindered the effectiveness of interventions and posed difficulties in sustaining improvements in water, hygiene, and sanitation conditions. The responsibility for overseeing the state of water, hygiene, and sanitation in schools is carried out through the work of cluster monitors from the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. Cluster monitors are delegated with the important task of visiting schools within their designated clusters to assess and monitor various aspects of school operations, including water, hygiene, and sanitation.

Jallow et al. (2019) examined the role of cluster monitors in monitoring water, sanitation, and hygiene practices in schools in The Gambia and reiterated the importance of cluster monitors in promoting and sustaining proper hygiene and sanitation practices. The primary role of a cluster monitor is indeed to facilitate and contribute to the improvement of school standards. Without a dedicated policy in place, it can be challenging to ensure consistent and systematic implementation of these essential components across schools. The presence of a policy enables effective monitoring of the implementation



of water, hygiene, and sanitation practices in schools. It allows cluster monitors to assess the current state of affairs, identify areas for improvement, and provide targeted guidance and support to schools.

The absence of any mention or discussion of a School WASH policy in the Education Sector Strategic Plan 2016-2030 highlights a significant oversight in addressing the crucial aspects of water, hygiene, and sanitation in schools. The strategic plan, spanning 200 pages, fails to recognise the need for a specific policy or outline efforts to develop one. While the strategic plan identifies monitoring and supervision as vital components of quality education, the lack of specific guidelines or procedures for implementing and assessing water, hygiene, and sanitation systems implies a skewed focus and limited potential for improvement. The inclusion of a School WASH policy in the strategic plan would provide a clear roadmap for implementation, outlining the necessary processes, procedures, and standards to be met in schools. Elaborating on the importance of a School WASH policy and its absence in the strategic plan highlights the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses the essential components of quality education.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The qualitative research method was utilized to examine relevant documents such as the Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education and Higher Education Research Science and Technology (2017, October) Education Sector Strategic Plan 2016 – 2030. By reviewing these documents, the researchers aimed to assess the plans, processes, and procedures that govern and monitor the implementation of WASH in educational institutions. This qualitative analysis provided insights into the regulatory framework and guidelines surrounding WASH practices in schools. However, data was also collected through face-to-face interviews conducted with the head teachers of the schools included in the research. These interviews aimed to gather specific information about the implementation of WASH policies and practices in the selected schools. By engaging directly with the head teachers, the researchers could obtain firsthand perspectives and experiences related to WASH standards in the schools. By combining the qualitative analysis of policy documents with the quantitative data obtained from the administration of the questionnaire, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the significance of WASH policies in enhancing the standards of lower and upper basic schools within the Region One Education Directorate.

### **Sample Selection**

A total of 74 schools were selected for inclusion in the study through a random sampling procedure. To ensure a fair and unbiased selection, a random number table was employed, derived from the list of schools within the catchment area. The random numbers generated were then matched with the corresponding schools to determine which ones would be visited for data collection purposes. During the research visits, data were collected from the head teachers or individuals appointed to act as their representatives in cases where the head teachers were absent. This delegation allowed for continuity and ensured that relevant information regarding WASH policies and practices could still be obtained.

### **Sample Size**

To determine an appropriate sample size for the study, Slovin's formula was applied. The population under consideration consisted of 195 schools within the region. With a desired confidence level of 90% and a margin of error, or sampling error, of 0.1 (10%), the formula was employed as follows:

$$n = N / (1 + Ne^2)$$

Substituting the given values into the formula:

$$n = 195 / (1 + 195(0.1^2)) \quad n = 195 / (1 + 1.95) \quad n = 195 / 2.95 \quad n \approx 66.10$$

The calculated sample size was approximately 66.10. To ensure a more practical and feasible sample, the number was rounded up to the nearest 10, resulting in a sample size of 70. However, it was anticipated that there might be non-responses, declines, or inaccessible schools during data collection.

To account for this, an additional 4 schools were added to the sample, bringing the final sample size to 74. This ensured that the final sample size adequately represented the population of 195 schools within the region.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

For data collection, a questionnaire was employed, comprising a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions. The questionnaire was administered to the head teachers of the selected schools to gather information relevant to the study. Closed-ended questions provided respondents with predefined response options, allowing for easy quantification and statistical analysis of the collected data. On the other hand, open-ended questions provided an opportunity for the head teachers to express their thoughts and opinions in more detail. The collected data were analysed using version 20 of the SPSS software. This statistical software facilitated data organization, manipulation, and analysis. The results were interpreted and presented using tables. These graphical representations helped to illustrate patterns, trends, and relationships within the data, enabling a clearer understanding of the findings.

The qualitative data obtained from the review of the strategic plan and the education policy was analyzed using two main approaches. First, direct quotations from the documents were used to support specific claims or provide evidence for certain aspects of the study. Second, a thematic analysis was conducted on the content of the documents. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, or key ideas present in the text. The thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the policy's content, objectives, and guidelines related to WASH implementation in schools.

### **Ethical Considerations**

An approved permission letter was obtained from the Director of the region. This permission letter served as official authorization to conduct the study within educational institutions. Informed consent was obtained from every respondent before conducting the interviews. The respondents were provided with detailed information about the study, its purpose, and the data collection process. They were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they had the right to withdraw or discontinue their involvement at any stage of the data collection. It was emphasized that their decision to participate or withdraw would not have any negative consequences or impact on their relationship with the school or the researchers.

Privacy and confidentiality were strictly maintained throughout the study. Respondents were guaranteed that their identities would be protected, and no comments or statements would be attributed to any specific individual. The information collected would be used solely for academic purposes, and no reproduction of responses would be used for marketing, publicity, income generation, or fame-seeking purposes.

### **Results**

The results of the study are presented using, tables, and relevant sections obtained from the review of national documents. However direct quotations from the reviewed documents are utilized to enrich the analysis and provide qualitative insights. This combination of presentation formats ensures a comprehensive and informative portrayal of the study's findings.

**Table 1:** Showing the availability of the WASH Policy

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Non response	1	1.4	1.4
Yes	12	16.2	17.8
No	56	75.7	94.5
Not accessible at the time of the visit	4	5.4	100.0
Total	73	98.6	
Total	74	100.0	

Field survey, 2023

Majority 75.7% (n=56) of the schools, do not have any WASH policy, while 16.2% (n=12) of the school claimed to have a WASH Policy.

**Table 2:** Showing the presence of WASH modules in the school curriculum

	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Yes	17	23.0	25.8
No	44	59.5	92.4
Not accessible at the time of the visit	5	6.8	100.0
Non response	8	10.8	
Total	74	100.0	

Field Survey, 2023

59.5% (n=44) of the schools did not have WASH modules in their school curriculum, while 23% (n=17) of the schools claimed to have WASH modules in their School curriculum

**Table 3:** Approaches to Impart the WASH Concepts in Schools

Approach	Frequency	Percentage
Assembly	29	48.85
Home Economics	10	14.08
Integrated Studies	6	8.45
Moral Lesson	8	11.27
Science Curriculum	3	4.23
Health week	2	2.82
Health Bay	2	2.82
Health Science	1	1.41
Physical Education	1	1.41
Peer Education	1	1.41
Nurse	2	2.82
Specialist/Expert	2	2.82
Red Cross	1	1.41
Girls Club	1	1.41
Drama/Poetry Club	1	1.41
Counselors	1	1.41
Others	3	4.23

Field survey, 2023

### Extracts from the Review of the Relevant National Documents

At the early stages of the primary level, Science and Social and Environmental Studies will be fused and combined as one learning area called Integrated Studies. Integrated Studies will lean more towards science-related issues concerning the environment and personal well-being (Ministry of Basic and

Secondary Education 2011). Curriculum Framework for Basic Education. The Gambia., 2.3.2 Integrated science, p.20)

The sector will collaborate with the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare (MoHSW) to implement institution-based health service delivery and school health and nutrition education will be moved away from a medical approach to school-based programmes that will seek to improve access and retention; and school-based de-worming. Awareness creation of neglected tropical diseases and vision screening will be introduced. (Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education and Higher Education Research Science and Technology. (2017, October). Education Sector Strategic Plan 2016 – 2030.7.17.3, school health and nutrition education, p.26).

In the area of monitoring and supervision of teaching and learning in schools, the minimum standards for quality education indicators will be periodically reviewed to indicate that schools that meet the standards are on the path of delivering quality education. (Ministries of Basic and Secondary Education and Higher Education Research Science and Technology (2017, October). Education Sector Strategic Plan 2016 – 2030 .7.20, Monitoring and supervision p.26)

Cluster monitors are members of the Regional Office staff, and are answerable to the Regional Director. The Regional Director may delegate responsibility for the day-to-day management of the work of the cluster monitors to a Principal or Senior Education Officer (PEO or SEO) under his or her direction. The role of the cluster monitor is to assist schools in this drive for improvement, and thus to raise standards. The role is a finely balanced one. It carries some responsibility to ensure, on behalf of the Regional Director and the Director of Standards and Quality Assurance, that schools are providing at least a satisfactory level of education to their pupils. However, this is not the main emphasis. One essential part of the role is the facilitation of the whole school development process, questioning, challenging, and supporting school management committees (SMCs) as they take the lead in developing their schools (A4, Roles and Responsibilities, p.6, Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education, 2011)

## Discussion

A WASH policy is a key component of implementing the WASH concept in schools. It serves as a guiding framework that outlines the goals, strategies, and procedures for achieving and maintaining adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene standards in educational institutions. The policy provides direction to stakeholders, including governments, ministries of education, school administrators, teachers, and students, on their respective roles and responsibilities in ensuring the provision of WASH facilities and promoting hygiene practices in schools.

While a policy remains an important tool for implementation and enforcement, there is no such document in the schools in the region one education directorate and by extension the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. The research revealed that 75.7% (n=56) of the schools, do not have any WASH policy or relied on the directives of a Policy to implement WASH. In line with the results of Johnson et al. (2020) and Ahmed et al. (2018), who found a significant number of schools face challenges in implementing adequate Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) practices due to the absence of inadequacy of WASH policies. The findings from both studies underline the essential role of a dedicated WASH policy in ensuring the provision of adequate water, handwashing facilities, and functional toilets in schools. Schools in the study area developed their approaches to address WASH issues, in particular the hygiene education component of WASH. The research findings indicate that a significant portion number of schools 48.85%, (n=29) used assembly grounds as a platform to impart WASH education and sensitize their pupils.

Using the assembly ground as a forum for WASH discussions allow schools to reach a large number of students simultaneously, making it an efficient approach in terms of dissemination. Similar findings have been observed by Smith et al. (2019) who found that 52% of the surveyed schools utilised assembly grounds as a platform for WASH education and raising awareness among students consistent with the findings of Martinez et al. (2020) who highlighted the use of assembly grounds for WASH education in their study, with 62% of the surveyed schools adopting this approach. This approach



demonstrates recognition of the importance of creating awareness among students and fostering a culture of WASH practices. However, there are challenges associated with measuring the learning outcomes of the approach. Without an organized format or procedure to conduct WASH discussions on the assembly ground, there is a risk of inconsistency, lack of quality, and relevance in the messages delivered. This challenge was highlighted by Johnson et al. (2020), which found that the absence of clear guidelines or standards for WASH education can result in inconsistencies in the messages delivered while Ahmed et al. (2018) emphasised the importance of developing clear learning objectives to guide the extent and relevance of WASH education. The absence of clear learning objectives for assembly ground-based WASH education and the lack of proper guidelines or standards can indeed result in a mismatch between the content delivered and the student's level of understanding and practice (Smith et al., 2019).

It is evident in the research that 14.08% (n=10) indicated that WASH issues are adequately discussed in the Home Economics Curriculum, 11.27% (n=6) of the respondents indicated that WASH has been covered in the integrated studies, 4.23% (n=3) of the respondent indicated that WASH is covered within the science curriculum, 1.41%(n=1) of the respondents indicated WASH issues have been effectively covered in Health Science and Physical education curricula. Similar findings such as Smith et al. (2018) found that only 20% of schools surveyed had integrated WASH topics into their curricula, indicating a widespread gap in addressing these issues while Johnson and Patil (2020) revealed that less than 10% of health education curricula explicitly included WASH content.

However, this study did not set to confirm this in any of the schools that gave this information, but a careful review of the curriculum framework for Basic Education, 2011 indicated that these subjects exist and are offered at this level. Home economics is a subject that cuts across the whole length of the Basic cycle system, what is intriguing to note is that WASH is not comprehensively articulated in the document and no adequate learning objective or indicator was developed to measure performance contrary to what has been indicated by some of the respondents during data collection. In integrated studies, health and hygiene are categorically spelt out and identified as a sub-learning area within the subject, but no learning objective was developed to guide the extent to which it should be covered or the knowledge and skills gained from the topic that will improve the demonstration and practice of the concepts learned in this sub-learning area. In the science subject, a similar observation exists as in the integrated studies. Contrary to the indications of the respondents who asserted that the issues of WASH were discussed in the Physical Education curriculum, a careful review of the curriculum framework for (Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education (2011). Curriculum Framework for Basic Education (The Gambia) indicated that WASH or even anything related to it has not been cited or indicated in the sub-learning areas of this subject. In this regard, it is evident that the hygiene education component of WASH is not seriously implemented or given a proper focus to improve the skills and knowledge, and competencies of pupils in the study area.

The lack of a WASH Policy is not only observed in the schools but extended to the Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education. It is quite incredible to understand that approaches to provide and maintain water, hygiene, and sanitation in schools are not highlighted in the Gambia National Education Policy 2016-2030, which serves as a guiding framework for educational practices, does not specifically emphasise the importance of WASH in schools, although school health and nutrition is categorically identified as a significant area of implementation and intervention. This is consistent with the findings of UNESCO (2017) which revealed that many countries, particularly in low- and middle-income regions, lack explicit policies or guidelines related to WASH in schools as well as Freeman et al. (2017) who examined the integration of WASH in national education policies across 69 countries and found that only 39% of the countries had specific references to WASH in their policies, indicating a significant gap in recognition and prioritisation. In the same vein Joshi et al. (2020) also revealed that although the country had a national school sanitation and hygiene education policy, its implementation remained limited due to the lack of explicit inclusion in the broader education policy.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings indicated the need for a comprehensive and well-defined School Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) policy in the education system. The absence of such a policy at both the school and Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education levels poses significant challenges to the implementation and maintenance of adequate water, hygiene, and sanitation standards in schools. The lack of a WASH policy in schools has led to inconsistent approaches and practices in addressing WASH issues, with many schools relying on ad hoc measures or the directives of a general policy. This inconsistency can result in inadequate provision of WASH facilities, ineffective hygiene education, and a lack of clear learning objectives for students.

Furthermore, the absence of WASH-related guidance in key school management tools and the lack of specific directives for cluster monitors in addressing WASH issues further exacerbate the problem. Without clear guidelines and policies, there is a risk of ambiguity, inconsistency, and limited accountability in addressing water, hygiene, and sanitation in schools.

The inclusion of WASH topics in relevant subjects within the curriculum, such as Home Economics, integrated studies, and science, is a positive step. However, the lack of comprehensive articulation, learning objectives, and indicators to measure performance hinders the effective implementation of WASH education. A review and enhancement of the curriculum framework are necessary to ensure that WASH topics are adequately covered and contribute to improving students' knowledge, skills, and competencies. The absence of any mention or discussion of a School WASH policy in key education policy documents, such as the Gambia National Education Policy and the Education Sector Strategic Plan, reflects a significant oversight.

## **Recommendations**

Based on the research findings, the following recommendations require action:

1. The Ministry of Basic and Secondary Education should prioritise the development and implementation of a comprehensive School WASH policy to establish and maintain adequate water, sanitation, and hygiene standards in schools. This policy should align with international commitments and outline clear goals, strategies, and procedures.
2. The Ministry should review schools' curriculum framework to ensure the comprehensive coverage of WASH topics in relevant subjects, as well as develop clear learning objectives and indicators to measure students' performance in WASH knowledge, skills, and competencies.
3. It should provide clear guidelines, protocols, and resources to schools and cluster monitors to effectively address water, hygiene, and sanitation issues.
4. WASH-related guidance should be incorporated into school management tools and manuals to ensure consistency and adherence to established requirements.
5. There should be elaborate investment in capacity-building programmes and awareness campaigns for teachers, school administrators, and cluster monitors to enhance their knowledge and skills in implementing effective WASH practices.
6. Students, parents, and communities should be educated about the importance of WASH and its role in maintaining a clean and healthy school environment.

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