Global Handwashing Day in the Time of Ebola

We shouldn't require a horrific epidemic like Ebola to remind us why we observe Global Handwashing Day today. But it seems, alas, many in the world can use a reminder about the importance of good hygiene. Though proper hygiene - including the use of soap and water to stop the transmission of infections - has been recognized for at least 150 years as critical to public health, actual hygienic practices around the world lag far behind what should be a basic standard of safety for all of us.

The problem is of course most acute for the poorest people. Many of the world's poor people simply lack access to safe water, decent sanitation (including places to defecate in privacy and safety), and soap needed to stay safe throughout the day from water-borne and hand-to-mouth pathogens. It is always shocking, but alas not all that infrequent in low-income settings, to visit clinics and even hospitals that lack running water and soap in the wards. In such circumstances, doctors and nurses not only treat infectious diseases but transmit them as well, often even to themselves.

There are of course two kinds of problems to overcome. The first is extreme poverty itself. Proper hygiene requires a basic minimum of resources. Hundreds of millions of people lack that bare minimum. For them, we need to extend help to provide safe water, sanitation, and enough income (e.g. through help to improve farming practices) so that the households can afford soap and other essential needs for personal safety. Ensuring that households can meet such basic needs should be a core global standard, but we're not there yet. Ending the extreme poverty that blocks proper hygiene and the foundations of good health should be a core worldwide commitment of the new Sustainable Development Goals.

The second problem to overcome is that of bad habits. Proper hygiene requires that
individuals know the importance of good hygiene and develop the habits to carry it out. Many people with ample incomes lack the important habits of timely handwashing with soap, and thereby unknowingly endanger themselves and others around them.

Our two organizations have forged a powerful partnership for spreading good hygienic behavior in very low-income rural settings, where extreme poverty and the lack of awareness and good habits often compound each other, resulting in massive yet avoidable disease burdens. **Unilever** is one of the world's leading producers of soaps and other hygiene products. **The Millennium Villages Project** is a flagship program of the United Nations, academia, and private partners to show to how even the poorest communities can pursue the Millennium Development Goals. Together, we are illustrating how hygiene, safe water, and sanitation can be promoted among the poorest of the poor.

Unilever has developed a 21-day school-based program to teach children the good habits of personal hygiene, including regular handwashing with soap. This program is now being deployed in the Millennium Villages. The Millennium Villages Project not only encourages children (and their parents) to wash with soap regularly, but also helps the communities with the finances and logistics to access safe drinking water and decent sanitation.

Unilever's educational program is called the "**School of 5,**" and aims to promote handwashing with soap during five critical times in the day: before breakfast, lunch and dinner; after using the toilet; and when bathing. Five superhero characters represent the occasions and deliver hygiene messages in a fun and engaging manner. Posters, games, community events, a glow germ demonstration, and contests are used to raise the children's awareness about how invisible germs can cause illness and cannot be removed by water alone.

Students take a daily pledge to wash their hands with soap and record their handwashing behaviors for 21 consecutive days. We have found in our work that this 21-day program has continuing effects in the weeks after the program ends. Of course we
are working towards our core goal, to make the behavior change stick for the long term.

On this Global Handwashing Day, let's commit ourselves to good personal hygiene and to help for all of those around the world who cannot afford it on their own. Ebola has reminded us of the most basic truth: we are all in this together. Epidemics in one place, no matter how poor and remote, can quickly become crises for all. Yet we also know that health for all is within reach, through greater awareness, stepped up help for the poor, and creative public-private partnerships that allow companies, civil society, and governments to each contribute to the end of poverty and preventable disease.

*Professor Jeffrey Sachs is the Director of The Earth Institute and a senior UN advisor.*

*Ms. Myriam Sidibe is Global Social Mission Director for Lifebuoy, part of Unilever. She recently gave a TED Talk on the importance of handwashing.*

*Don't miss a special series produced by The Huffington Post in recognition of the threats posed by Ebola, particularly to West Africa. To see all the posts in that series, read here.*

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