

# CLTS in East Africa: a pathway to child and youth empowerment?

# 7

by CATHY SHUTT

## Introduction

*Youth compared to elders are large in number and if they decide to do something they can do it quickly... They need to be given a chance and may need to be mobilised because children and youth do not always appear in meetings and if they do appear, I don't think they are given equal opportunities to give ideas.*

Listen Materu, District Urban Water Board Manager Kisarawe, Tanzania.

In many communities in Africa, traditional attitudes towards children and youth (sometimes as old as 35) prevent them from being heard and contributing to local development. Can the Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) approach catalyse changes in these attitudes that reinforce unequal power relations between adults and young people? Can it provide a pathway of empowerment and enable young people to play a greater role in community development and governance? If so, how? These are some of the questions

explored in this article, which documents findings from research to consider the extent and effects of child and youth involvement in CLTS.

The research took place within the context of a regional CLTS project being implemented in three countries in East Africa (Ethiopia, Kenya and Tanzania), supported by Plan UK with funding from the UK Department for International Development (DfID). The project recognises the potential of CLTS to increase child and youth participation in local development and is underpinned by a model of change (Figure 1).

In the model, CLTS triggering and training are presumed to lead to increased awareness of the risks of open defecation and poor hygiene. This **capacity change** is expected to ignite a **citizenship change** – an empowered commitment to individual behaviour change and collective action, such as community members helping each other to construct latrines, as well as monitoring construction and use. It is anticipated that this collective effort to eliminate open defecation and

Figure 1: CLTS model of change

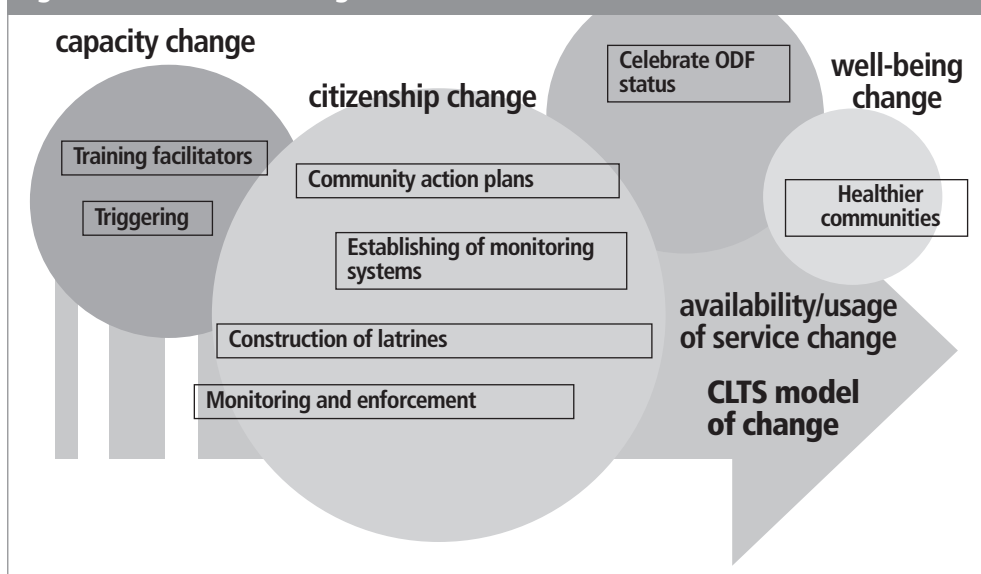


Figure 2: Map of locations



- enhance Plan staff and community representatives' critical thinking and learning to improve programme effectiveness.

Research was conducted in Shebedino District, Ethiopia, Kilifi District, Kenya and Kisarawe District, Tanzania (Figure 2). A similar format was followed in all three countries. Activities were conducted over three days by a team comprised of Plan staff, representatives from the communities visited and an expatriate consultant with a long-term relationship with Plan – me.

On the first day we discussed objectives before going on to develop research questions in local languages and design a research plan. Questions about changes that had taken place following triggering were a springboard for exploring if – and how – children and youth had contributed to change, as well as identifying factors that facilitated or hindered their involvement.

On the second day we visited two villages where community representatives and I facilitated focus group discussions with adult men, adult women, youth and children, supported by Plan staff. We spent the third day compiling stories from the different communities, analysing findings and considering implications.

improve sanitation will lead to a **well-being change** – improved health.

### Reflection on methodology

The research objectives were to:

- consider the extent and effects of child and youth involvement in the community level changes that are vital for the success of CLTS; and



Photo: Cathy Shutt

A community representative member of the Kilifi research team.

Language issues, the relative inexperience of community researchers and the backgrounds and personalities of various team members, all shaped the quality of the data produced in each location. Research in Shebedino, Ethiopia and Kilifi, Kenya benefited from lessons learnt in Kisarawe, Tanzania. Prior relationships with Plan staff in Kilifi helped to produce more nuanced accounts than was possible in the other locations.

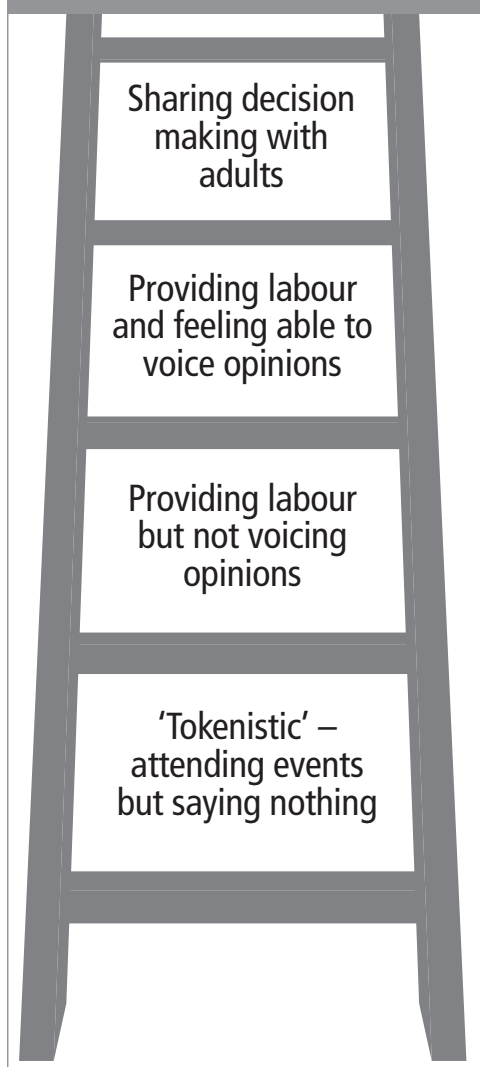
How representative these findings and opportunities were for learning were affected by choices of villages. Some, e.g. those in Ethiopia, had been triggered several years ago, while one in Kilifi had been triggered much more recently. Plan staff in Tanzania argued that findings from Kisarawe were influenced by distinct cultural practices of people living in the coastal region and could not be interpreted as being typically Tanzanian. Moreover, due to time constraints, the villages visited

tended to be fairly close to major roads. In Shebedino we visited two 'showcase' communities that have achieved open defecation free (ODF) status, but are not necessarily representative. According to staff, local politics have hindered the achievement of ODF by nearby villages triggered at about the same time. In Kisarawe and Kilifi more effort was made to visit villages with contrasting experiences – one that had achieved ODF status and one that had not.

Issues of representativeness also applied to the people participating in focus group discussions. Some groups included expert community informants, who claimed to find our visits motivating and empowering. But other discussions were attended by women who said little, suggesting the voices of women and marginalised people are probably under represented in the findings.

The methodological issues raised above illustrate the challenges associated with

**Figure 3: Concepts from Hart's ladder of participation**



making short-term research participatory and empowering. They also advise against generalising from findings. Yet staff and community members of the research team found it a useful learning experience, with the model of change and other conceptual tools encouraging fresh insights on social aspects of CLTS and its possibilities for child and youth participation. Concepts from Hart's ladder (Figure 3) used as originally intended by Hart – to encourage

reflection among participants about different levels of child and youth participation (Hart, 2008) – proved popular, stimulating lively debate. However, some of the issues raised below deserve deeper, more considered reflection than was possible during this particular research project.

### **CLTS leads to a sense of better well-being**

Researchers found that the triggering had heightened awareness of the risks associated with open defecation in all six communities visited. New understandings, together with the shame induced during participatory triggering exercises, inspired community-led decisions to develop action plans. Equipping every homestead with its own latrine was the main priority, complemented by awareness raising and monitoring to ensure individual behaviour change and proper use. Shebedino communities also built separate communal toilets for women and men – a response to the irritating problem of open defecation by non-resident passers by.

The action plans were evidence of a social or **citizenship change** described by a child in Kilifi as the community 'working hand in hand'. But implementation had not been easy. In Kilifi, for example, communities had to overcome cultural taboos.<sup>1</sup> There was resistance from some who felt that livelihoods were more of a priority. Rocky ground hampered progress in some locations and sandy soil in others. Nevertheless, in all communities visited, villagers appeared convinced that their efforts were paying off. Everywhere we went people spoke proudly of living in cleaner environments and experiencing reductions in the incidence of diseases such as diarrhoea and cholera. Villagers in both Kilifi and Shebedino reported reduced medical expenses, and one teacher in Kilifi attributed lower school absenteeism to CLTS. Children and youth were evidently

<sup>1</sup> Further details of how these cultural taboos were overcome can be found in Buluma Bwire's article, this issue.

**Box 1: Examples of child and youth contributions to CLTS****In the home:**

- Successfully persuading parents to build latrines – examples found in all communities visited.
- Giving advice about hygiene and sanitation related to proper use of latrines and food preparation.

**In the wider community:**

- Educating neighbours e.g. one 18 year old boy in Kisarawe visited about 15 houses to recommend they build latrines.
- Public awareness raising through videos, dramas, songs, poems and puppet shows.
- Digging latrine pits – male youth in all communities.
- Helping vulnerable, often female-headed households build latrines, e.g. two young female members of shit eradication committees in Shebedino helped at least three households construct latrines in each of their respective sub villages.
- Monitoring the construction and proper use of latrines – often in organised groups or committees.
- Cleaning latrines – usually the responsibility of younger children.
- Shaming open defecators and whistle blowing, e.g. 10 children in Shebedino physically captured an open defecator and turned him into local authorities.

benefiting from these well-being changes, but how had they been involved in the CLTS process?

**How are children and youth contributing to the citizenship change?**

Conversations with children and youth implied that the triggering and education on hygiene promoted by Plan had furnished them with a good understanding of sanitation issues. This capacity change together with peer pressure and the embarrassment experienced by children living in households without latrines had inspired young people to take action.

In all three countries children were proud of their own behaviour change – the way they used latrines. They were also involved in various activities that aimed to induce behaviour change in others. Some acted independently and focused on changing sanitation practices in their homes, while others also took part in various activities in the wider community.

**What hinders child and youth involvement in CLTS?**

Children were willing and able to play a role in implementing the communities' action plans. But the nature of opportunities available to an individual child was shaped by practical considerations, as well

as social and cultural contexts. School children did not have as much time as other youth to engage in community-level CLTS activities. However, they often made contributions through passing on sanitation messages in child-to-child health clubs, as well as maintaining the cleanliness of school latrines.

Some adults neither welcomed children's advice about good hygiene nor their efforts to monitor and shame open defecators. These attitudes deterred some children from engaging in certain CLTS activities. When we retold a group of younger girls in Kilifi about the whistle blowing initiatives of children in Shebedino, they laughed in horror, protesting that they could never take such action. They feared it would be considered insulting by adults, particularly their fathers, and might lead to them being beaten.

Fortunately such incidences were rare. But the young girls' comments are a reminder that encouraging youth to operate outside of accepted norms can implicitly challenge power relations and so is never without risk. It may occasionally raise child protection issues and the implications of this deserve serious consideration by CLTS practitioners. Plan staff are currently considering the possible risks of such threats and how to mitigate them in

their ongoing work with communities.

Local staff in Kilifi and Kisarawe interpreted adult reluctance to accept CLTS advice from young people as a manifestation of cultural norms and power relations that frequently prevent children and youth voicing opinions in the home and/or community. As a woman in Kilifi eloquently put it, 'Even if a person has a good idea, if they are a youth, child or woman they will not be taken up.' Conversations with Ethiopian staff suggested adults in Shebedino are generally more receptive to suggestions from young people. However, one Plan Ethiopia staff member did cite parental attitudes as a barrier to involving children and youth in some CLTS activities in more recently triggered communities.

We met children in both Shebedino and Kilifi who commented that it was difficult to join CLTS activities because of their household chores. This was a particular challenge for girls who, as a result of gendered divisions of labour, tend to have more household responsibilities than boys, and not as much freedom of movement. Although some of the barriers that prevent girls participating in activities are underpinned by practical concerns for their safety, it could be argued that they too are reflective of power inequalities between males and females. Families are often concerned that girls are vulnerable to bodily and reputational harm from physically stronger males.

### **Child and youth involvement in CLTS: meaningful participation or not?**

In spite of the barriers identified above, many adults acknowledged the critical roles that children and youth were playing in achieving CLTS outcomes. Yet, in the course of our analysis, aided by concepts from Hart's ladder, we realised that the examples they gave illustrated quite different levels of participation. Some were more empowering than others.

Descriptions of children's improved

toilet habits, and youth's ability to construct latrines because of their physical strength were not entirely consistent with notions of empowered participation. References to children cleaning latrines, and a story about youth being invited onto a CLTS taskforce after elders had decided they were too busy, left me wondering: could we really consider such involvement in terms of participation at all? According to concepts from Hart's ladder, these actions could be interpreted as manipulation or non-participation.

But was this fair? Were the contributions of children and youth merely conditioned responses to pressure or suggestions from more powerful adults? Or were some of their contributions voluntary acts of agency? Unsurprisingly, children and youth in Africa, like many of their peers in Western societies have limited decision-making power over resource allocations. They are therefore unable to exercise agency in terms of making decisions about whether their households construct latrines (Musyoki cited in Fernandez, 2008). Nonetheless, in all villages visited we met children who said they had successfully persuaded parents to build latrines. These claims were often supported by adults and evidence that children were influencing choices within their homes.

Moreover, several examples showed children were able to use their knowledge and agency to resist or manipulate adults in efforts to protect their health. A natural leader in Shebedino recounted a story, 'A child saw a mother preparing *inset* [a local staple] without washing her hands and said, "Mother we have learnt you should wash your hands before cooking food and afterwards. You never washed your hands before cooking so I am not eating that."' One boy in Kilifi proudly told researchers that he had shamed his resistant father into action by starting to sink a latrine. His embarrassed father soon rushed to help him complete the task. In Kilifi and Shebedino, female children had deliberately



Photo: Cathy Shutt

Children's focus group in Shebedino.

decided to target their mothers or female members of households with sanitation messages, having consciously decided that women tend to be more receptive to their messages than men, who were also often absent.

### **CLTS: a process for furthering child and youth empowerment**

CLTS did appear to be enabling some children to use their agency to influence change at the household level. And Plan staff in Kisarawe, who are still often classified as 'youth' and thus frustrated with their own lack of influence in family decision-making, insisted this should be interpreted as a major change in the particular cultural context. But examples of children influencing household decision-making were not the most interesting examples of the potential of CLTS to empower children and youth. Far more exciting were suggestions that child and youth involvement in CLTS

was earning them respect and new opportunities for participation in community development.

Some adults and children in most communities referred to the diminishing power of cultural beliefs that denied children agency. According to a fifteen year old boy in Shebedino, 'Many things have changed in our village since the triggering.' These changes included 'adults accepting our ideas'. Adults there acknowledged that children and youth were essential to the success of CLTS.

Adults were beginning to view younger members of the community as assets in their fight against disease. We were given two examples related to the advantages of children's innocence. Women in Shebedino attributed the success of the child whistle blowers to their uninhibited use of words considered shocking by adults. Similarly, male elders in Kilifi admitted the essential role that children played during the trig-

gering, directing facilitators to faeces that adults would have tried to hide out of embarrassment.

CLTS was enabling – perhaps forcing – adults to acknowledge the potential contributions that children and youth can make to both the individual behavioural change and collective action that is vital if communities are to achieve ODF status. Sometimes this admission appeared indicative of youth empowerment – a gradual shift in power relationships between adults and youth. According to one elder in Kilifi, ‘Men have come to acknowledge that even youth can decide and do things. There is new thinking about youth.’

This change was most evident in a case study described by a group of young men, in their mid to late twenties, who were officers on the CLTS committee. The story they told about their transformation from ‘layabouts’ to respected members of the community illustrates the complex, emergent and unpredictable path that development interventions can take. Training by Plan had motivated these young men to play key roles in the triggering process and subsequent activities. Having official positions on the CLTS committee had earned them respect – some elders described them as role models they could learn from. It had also inspired a sense of citizenship that encouraged them to remain involved in CLTS when the motivation of others waned. It had contributed a change in relationships:

*Initially we used to fear the wazee [elders] but now they see we have something to tell them, or we have a point. Initially youth used to see elders trying to change us, not us to change them. Now if we have points, we can tell them and if we blend it together, we can come up with constructive things.*

But it was not only direct involvement in CLTS and this sense of responsibility that was helping to shift power relations between these young men and elders

described in this note’s opening quote. According to one young man, triggering had led to ‘more cooperation among youth’. When young people started working together to build latrines, they realised the potential benefit of collective action. As one proudly recounted:

*We started youth groups. We did savings. We have started small businesses in the community so we are responsible members of the community.*

This group, which included young women, felt that their new identities as entrepreneurs had won them respect and contributed to improved relations with elders and officials like the chief. These young people were not only being invited to the chief’s *baraza* meetings, formerly the preserve of elders, and allowed space to speak, but being encouraged to stand for official leadership positions.

During analysis in Kilifi, Plan Kenya staff attributed the success of youth in Chumani to their organisation as a group. This seemed reasonable. In all three countries the youth and children I met who represented organised groups were significantly more confident and aware of the contributions they were making to community development than children acting independently. As a child in Kisarawe remarked:

*Our confidence increases in a group... Once one gets an idea others [in a group] can also think more about the same idea and it can be used to educate the community. Once we are educated we can add other ideas and then people can understand that children are important partners in the community.*

It was an opinion shared by the District Urban Water Board Manager, who felt that ‘if they [children and youth] can form groups they will feel that they have a role to play,’ and that if it was possible to change



adults' attitudes 'these groups could give ideas':

*Then they will feel that they are respected and will begin to think they are an asset to the village.*

He evidently thought that organising children and youth was key to enhancing the participation of children and youth in decisions related to community development and governance.

### **CLTS: a means to enhancing child and youth participation?**

Despite methodological limitations, the research process provided staff and community researchers with a useful learning opportunity, enabling them to better appreciate CLTS's social dimensions. In all three countries, researchers established that children and youth can and do make significant contributions to **citizenship changes** ignited by CLTS triggering. Preliminary evidence suggests such involvement can be empowering and help to shift attitudes that have tended to exclude young people from realising their potential to contribute to local development and governance.

Although these findings are promising, Plan staff in Kenya raised important questions for investigation by practitioners interested in further exploring CLTS's potential to empower young people. Some factors encouraged youth empowerment in Shebedino and Kilifi, such as the timing of the training of youth facilitators prior to triggering, including children in organised committees and stimulating the formation of youth groups. Can these factors be replicated elsewhere? Or were some encouraging factors context specific and unique?

Moreover, what can be done to reduce the barriers to children engaging in community activities, particularly those that disproportionately affect young women and girls? And, most importantly of all, what measures need to be taken to

reduce the risks of children involved in CLTS coming to harm?

These are tough questions that require more in-depth, participatory research before conclusions can be reached. And future studies must incorporate the one clear lesson emerging from the East Africa work. Any investigation of the potential of CLTS to empower young people must be underpinned by explicit, nuanced analysis of how power relations operating in particular contexts affect child and youth participation. This assessment must include consideration of the possible risks associated with pursuing children's engagement in CLTS as a means for their empowerment.



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