

NAWIRI: Piloting a business model for low-cost sanitary products in Kenya

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Women and girls living in Kenya's low-income settlements frequently lack access to basic menstrual hygiene materials. This Practice Note details the development of a business model for low-cost sanitary products in Naivasha, the setbacks encountered, and what WSUP has learnt from the pilot intervention.

Context: the impacts of poor menstrual hygiene management on girls' education in Kenya

Menstrual Hygiene Management (MHM) is a vital but often overlooked component of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programming, and core to the achievement of multiple Sustainable Development Goals. Inadequate MHM has wide-ranging social and economic impacts, including on school absenteeism, already a major issue in low-income urban settlements (LICs). UNICEF have estimated that in Kenya alone, more than 1.2 million primary school-age children do not attend school at all, with children in LICs among the hardest to reach;¹ while over one million girls miss school at some stage every month because they cannot afford sanitary pads, with lack of access to private and hygienic facilities for practicing menstrual hygiene similarly a huge issue.²

Menstrual Hygiene Management in Kenya: a multi-dimensional problem

A number of factors contribute to inadequate MHM in Kenya, including:

- **Education and awareness:** Girls in Kenya receive inadequate education on menarche, puberty, and MHM, and lack the necessary information channels for on-going support, mentorship, and knowledge. For example, girls and women in LICs have little knowledge about reproductive tract infections caused by inadequate personal hygiene during menstruation.
- **Products:** High costs and distribution challenges limit the accessibility of disposable pads to the majority of low-income girls and women. Although enterprises

have emerged focused on low-cost sanitary pads, their reach is limited. Formative research has shown that women and girls in Kenya face monthly challenges in practicing menstrual hygiene, with 65% unable to afford sanitary pads.³

- **Sanitation:** Access to sanitation is a broader issue in urban LICs in Kenya. Even in the context of interventions to improve sanitation, MHM is under-prioritised, and impacted by a lack of coordination between WASH stakeholders.

The NAWIRI project: improving access to low-cost sanitary products in Naivasha

In response to these issues, WSUP partnered with Life Bloom Services International (LBSI - a Kenyan NGO) to improve access to low-cost sanitary products in Naivasha, a town in Kenya's Rift Valley. A WSUP-led market assessment of five schools in Naivasha had affirmed that lack of access to sanitary pads was a critical issue, with schoolgirls resorting to using rudimentary materials — including mattresses, rugs, tissues and cotton wool — during their menses. The project aimed to break new ground in Kenya through the development of a commercially sustainable business model, to improve access to affordable menstrual hygiene products while also creating jobs through local manufacturing.

The NAWIRI Business Model

The NAWIRI business model is presented in Figure 1 overleaf. The identification of a local manufacturer — a decision taken after direct manufacturing by LBSI was found to be too capital-intensive — was not straightforward: sanitary towels are generally imported to the region from China, with few local businesses engaged in their production.

The chosen manufacturer was selected based on cost, acceptable minimum order quality, and location proximity to LBSI and the target market in Naivasha.

1 <https://www.unicef.org/kenya/quality-education>

2 <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2020/2/24/i-wish-i-was-a-boy-the-kenyan-girls-fighting-period-poverty>

3 Sivakami, M, et al (2019) Effect of menstruation on girls and their schooling, and facilitators of menstrual hygiene management in schools: surveys in government schools in three states in India, 2015. *Journal of Global Health*.

In addition to direct selling, LBSI distributed NAWIRI products directly into schools, reaching 110 schoolgirls a month: these products were donated to schools and purchased through public fundraising, charitable platforms and funds allocated via other LBSI projects focused on female empowerment.

Figure 1: NAWIRI Business Model



Project Outcomes

Key project outcomes are presented in Table 1. Although the project succeeded in selling over 4600 sanitary towels, a number of significant challenges were encountered, including:

- **Product quality:** LBSI gathered feedback from the customers on poor product quality, with complaints centred on the pad being too thin, wings not being placed proportionally, and the adhesive being too sticky. This was one of a number of challenges encountered with the local manufacturer, who also failed to meet LBSI expectations on packaging and timely response to complaints.
- **Low margins for direct selling:** the available profit margins were not sufficiently attractive for the women entrepreneurs to take up distribution and selling of the product in the long term (see Table 2). The balance between affordability for low-income customers and profitability for the entrepreneurs proved difficult to achieve.

Table 1: Key Project Outcomes

NAWIRI Sanitary towels sold	Number of girls reached with free sanitary towels monthly	Women trained with transferable selling skills
4645	135	14

- **High production cost:** the pressure to create local jobs within manufacturing led to the cost of production restricting the selling price.
- **Governance:** owing to its status as an NGO, LBSI was unable to scale-up the product awareness campaign without establishing a legally recognised commercial subsidiary.

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Table 2: Product costs and pricing

Cost of Goods/Production Cost (KES)		
Cost of product	28.80	
Cost of packaging	1.50	
Cost of shipping package material	0.85	
Contingencies	0.85	
Total production cost per packet	32.00	£0.25
Selling price to women / distributors	36.00	
Selling price to customer	45.00	

Conclusion: what have we learnt?

The NAWIRI brand responds to a clear consumer need in Naivasha, where demand for improved menstrual hygiene products remains very high. However, the business model needs to be refined in response to the challenges experienced in the initial pilot. Post-project analysis, conducted by WSUP, suggests the following measures could enhance the future viability of the business model:

- **Importing:** Assessments indicate the cost of production can be reduced by importing the product from overseas. This would require a shift in the focus of the NAWIRI project, towards being more product-driven, and less concerned with job creation. However, there may be compromises, such as importing unbranded products and producing packaging in Kenya.
- **Cross-subsidise:** Engaging leading brands to donate a small portion of proceeds from sanitary pads sold in high-income communities — or potentially from established markets such as the UK and US — could go a long way in promoting affordable products to women and girls in LICs. Wider partnerships with these brands could also be explored, enabling the NAWIRI project to benefit from their commitment to sustainability, market experience, manufacturing infrastructure and know-how.
- **Additional sales channels:** In addition to door-to-door, the NAWIRI product could be sold through traditional retailers, boosting profit margins and the sustainability of the business model.
- **Impact investment:** The NAWIRI value proposition delivers against health, social, gender and environmental metrics. Preparing NAWIRI for impact investment offers a potential future route to scale.