

RIPPLES)))))

Fall 2007

INDIA:
Portraits of
Determination

also in this issue...

**Water and Sanitation
Fail the Grade**
page 2

**Ethiopian Village
Transforms Itself**
page 8



Water Partners
INTERNATIONAL

Water and Sanitation Fail to Make the Grade

for Schoolchildren in Developing Countries

In the U.S., autumn means settling back into the routine of school. But for millions of children around the world, that routine is often interrupted by something that may surprise you: lack of access to safe water and sanitation.

Approximately 443 million school days are lost each year due to water-related illnesses, making it a leading factor for school absenteeism in the developing world. These diseases include diarrhea, malaria, typhoid, schistosomiasis and other problems caused by intestinal parasites.



In addition to frequent illnesses, time spent collecting water also prevents many school-aged children, especially girls, from attending school. Like their mothers, girls bear the primary responsibility for collecting water for daily domestic use – drinking, cooking, cleaning, and bathing. Many young girls must spend several hours each day collecting water from distant and often polluted sources. Time spent collecting water replaces time spent at school, as meeting the basic water needs for the survival of the family comes first.

Scarce and Unsafe Water Threatens Education

Even when the children make it to school, the water and sanitation conditions often don't improve. For example, a recent assessment in Kenya revealed that more than 90 percent of rural primary schools do not have a safe water source. In dry areas, a number of schools have to close during the drought period due to lack of water. And for older girls, once they reach puberty, inadequate sanitation facilities are often cited as a reason for missed school days and drop-out rates. The bottom line: unsafe

water and inadequate sanitation threaten students' health and the quality of their education.

WaterPartners Helps Students

WaterPartners is working to address this lack of water and sanitation at schools in developing countries. A recent project in Western Kenya helped to establish safe drinking water for schools in the communities of Mbeme, Chiga, Nyamonge, and Mayenya. A 5,000-liter water tank was constructed us-

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ing a reticulation system and a hand pump was installed at each school.

Students, parents, teachers and other school officials in the four communities were taught about proper hygiene practices such as hand-washing. Students and teachers worked together to develop relevant and easy-to-understand hygiene education materials. Students used the materials in the schools, and also took them home to help educate their families and neighbors. School clubs were formed at each school, consisting of 30 students and two advisors. As a result, more students now are washing their hands from water containers hanging from trees next to latrines.



Kenyan students perform a song and dance in celebration of their new water source.



Women and girls in Dekera, Ethiopia, walked hours with heavy water jugs on their backs before the new community water source. Now, girls have time to go to school and water-related diseases have decreased.

Kenyan Teacher Expresses Thanks

In the community of Mbeme, head school teacher Caroline Amonde Jobita expresses her gratitude and talks about the success of the WaterPartners

The lesson is clear: safe water and sanitation are critical to school attendance

program, which was funded by Coca-Cola and the Millennium Water Alliance. “On behalf of the Mbeme community and school I wish to express my sincere gratitude and appreciation for the assistance you have given us in achieving our aim of clean water supply for the community and school.” She continued, “The clean water supply has had an impact on the number of pu-

Kenyan students smile as they drink safe water from their new water source.

pils joining the school. It has helped reduce most of the water-borne diseases. It has also reduced lateness in children coming to school. It has opened the eyes of parents to [the importance of hygiene]. It has made a change in our pupils who are shining in their appearance and performance. So far, it has proven a way to retain the children in school.”

WaterPartners’ community water projects have a similar impact on Ethiopian schools. “Before construction of the new wa-

ter system the children missed school,” explains Gebrehiwot Weldezigina, a community member in Dekera, Samre. “Now, they go. They have time to read and write, and also for social activities.”

A teenager in the Dekera community, Goiton Hatos, talks about the positive influence the new community water source has had on young women, “Now that the new water source has gone in, the number of girls has increased at school.”

The lesson is clear: safe water and sanitation are critical to school attendance, and in turn, the chance for a healthier and more productive life. ■



Portraits of Determination: Collecting Water In India

These images were taken during my recent trip to Tiruchirappali and depict the daily struggles that women and girls face while collecting water. But perhaps more importantly, this essay shares their determination and strength. In admiration, I dedicate these images to the hundreds of thousands of women and children living in and around Tiruchirappali who are working for access to clean water.

Empty Water Jugs

In India, water jugs often go empty. Women wait hours in long lines in crowded city streets for water available only during certain hours, on certain days. In rural areas, women walk miles to reach a water source. Despite these efforts, for the 300 million Indian people living in poverty, inadequate water is a daily reality.



Water: A Woman's Burden

In India, as in other countries, women and girls are responsible for collecting water for their households. Each day, enough water must be collected for drinking, cooking, bathing, cleaning, and watering gardens. For school-age girls, the burden of collecting water often interferes with school attendance, homework and sleep. Here a school girl, her thin leg visible next to the bucket, collects water from a public tap in a neighborhood called Khajapettai Main. She waits in line, sometimes for 40 minutes, to fill her vessel. Once it's full, it weighs 44 pounds. She puts it on her head and walks home. Then she repeats the process three to four more times.

Student Shares Hygiene Lessons

About an hour drive away from Khajapettai Main, in the rural village of Kollapatti, Shellam collects water to bathe and wash her hands. She has an advantage that may one day save her life or that of her future children: she understands the link between hygiene and good health. A member of the children's health club at her school, she sings songs with her schoolmates about washing their hands with soap before eating and after using the restroom. Her health group saves money to help pay for school sanitation supplies and also teaches other students about the importance of using toilets and drinking safe water. WaterPartners provided funding for hygiene education and for a water tap next to the toilet at Shellam's school.





Clean Water Saves a Child's Life

In Melanaduvalur, Sudaha washes her daughter with water from a household water connection that she obtained through a WaterCredit loan taken out from a women's self-help group. Before the loan, she had no other option but to collect contaminated water from a public tap. She shared the tap, which was regularly broken, with over 200 other people. The water situation for her daughter at school was no better - the public school did not provide access to clean drinking water for the students. These deficiencies in water and sanitation lead to disease and death. Out of every 1,000 children born in India, 87 die before their fifth birthday, mostly from preventable diseases, like diarrhea, that come from unsafe water.



Water Loan Brings Relief

Sellammal proudly holds her loan card, which has enabled her to obtain a water connection for herself, her husband and their two children. A member of a women's self-help group formed by WaterPartners' local partner organization, Gramalaya, Sellammal was able to obtain a WaterCredit loan through the self-help group. Before the water loan, Sellammal woke at 3 a.m. to collect water. While the city water system didn't turn on until 5 a.m., she had to get there early for a place in line. Waiting in line was the most difficult part of her day - fights often broke out as anger at the situation and line cutters intensified.



Women Demand Safe Water and a Better Future

Thousands of mothers like Sellammal and Sudaha join women's self-help groups to find means to improve the lives of their families. They are motivators within their households and within their communities. They come together in a common voice, for a common end - access to safe water. The need for safe water unites women throughout India and throughout the world. Nothing holds greater potential to transform the lives of these women, their children, and their children's children, than ready access to safe water.

With Access to Safe Water, an Ethiopian Village Transforms Itself

Only three years ago, a typical day in Asgam began with women and girls carrying jugs on their backs amid steep, rocky cliffs in search of water. It took three hours of walking across the rugged terrain of the Tigray region of Ethiopia to reach the nearest water source. Because the river dried up in the summer heat, they were forced to dig in the bed until the muddy water seeped into the holes they dug. Next, they had to walk the three hours back home carrying the water-filled jugs that could weigh up to 40 pounds.



Water Quest Ended

This essential, daily quest for water which took place for countless years in Asgam, has been radically altered since the community teamed up with WaterPartners International three years ago.

Asgam now has a well, which community members built together with WaterPartners, and which the community proudly cares for and maintains. Instead of the six hour round-trip journey, women and children now walk an average of *15 minutes* to get water.



An Asgam woman stands proudly in front of the water project sign.

Water Committee Educates Community

As part of the water project, Asgam, which consists of about 450 people, elected a local water committee to oversee the water project and to share the messages they learned from WaterPartners about health and hygiene with the rest of the community. The water project has been an empowering experience for the water committee and the community.

“We were elected by our community because they trust in us,” explains water committee

member Tigist Sintayeh. “We are happy to be a part of this project. We have had many development efforts in our community in the past; however, I believe this one will work because this is the first time we are seeing that the community is truly involved. And it is us who are in place to solve the problems ourselves. This is new to us and very effective.”

Instead of the six hour round-trip journey, women and children now walk an average of *15 minutes* to get water.

Another water committee member, Dejene, also talks about the important role of the committee. “We are a bridge between the project and the community. Before we were trained, we lived with garbage and dirtiness. We didn’t know the link between that and our health. Now, we have been changed. We know the link. Our work is helping especially the poorest of our community. My role is to promote what we have learned about sanitation and hygiene.”

Before the new well, the traditional water source the Asgam people collected water from contained much disease, as it was shared by livestock. Also, there was a problem with leeches in the water that would enter into the nose and throats of children and lodge there. According to a pre-program survey conducted by WaterPartners and its partner

organization, the Relief Society of Tigray (REST), nearly 98% of households surveyed did not purify their water.

Today, the safe water source, combined with the hygiene education, has resulted in a significant decrease in water-related disease. The people themselves are cleaner, as they now have enough water to wash with. As community member Brehana Gebrab notes, “Due to education and training, we have improved our lives and give more attention to our children’s hygiene.”

Ripple Effects to Continue

The new water source has had an especially profound impact on the women. The 22-fold decrease in time fetching water has allowed girls to go to school instead of spending all day collecting water. Also, their role in the water committees has helped women to earn more equality and respect in Asgam. “[Women and men] are now equal in the community,” states community member Asgedom Girmay.

The ripple effects of the safe and accessible new water source, the Asgam water committee’s health and hygiene education, and the greater opportunities for women in the community will continue for years and decades to come. ■



Safe water flows freely from the community well, bringing with it good health and new opportunities for the people of Asgam.



PARTNER PROFILE

Empowered Beneficiary Now Empowers Others

After marrying in 1995 and moving to the small village of Kongampatti, Mrs. J. Geetha faced a common situation in rural India. Her husband's home had no toilet and most of the village members practiced open defecation.

Soon after moving, however, Geetha was empowered to take action in her community when Gramalaya, a non-governmental organization, visited her village. A partner organization of WaterPartners International, Gramalaya focuses on water and sanitation needs in both rural and urban areas in and around the city of Tiruchirappalli in Tamil Nadu.

Geetha notes that the community-organizing aspects of Gramalaya's programs which she encountered then played a pivotal role her life. "Joining the women's self-help group gave me courage and confidence," she says.

After building her own toilet with help from her mother-in-law, she took on the task of helping her neighbors. She assisted village members in completing

13 toilets which are all still in use today. Soon thereafter, she applied to become a health educator for Gramalaya's hygiene promotion program for children and was hired.

"From the first day I visited the Gramalaya training center when I was a women's self-help group member, I knew that by joining Gramalaya, I could serve more people and help them achieve basic amenities," says Geetha. "I wanted to serve for the betterment of women, and for their social, economical and health improvement."

It was not long before Geetha took on increased responsibility as a community health worker. In this capacity, she helped to form approximately 350 women's self-help groups between 1997 and 2000. This experience made her an expert in community organiz-

ing and her depth of experience working with people in the field built the foundation for her success as a project coordinator for Gramalaya's first WaterPartners sponsored project in 2002.

Geetha Meets WaterPartners

During this first WaterPartners project, Geetha helped the village of Karthigaipatti to become 100 percent free from open defecation— a significant challenge for an area where there was a great deal of resistance to the construction of toilets. Despite the challenges, Geetha's energy and enthusiasm prevailed and she achieved her goal on time. During her second assignment as a project coordinator, Geetha once again successfully implemented a 100 percent sanitation program in two villages, helping



Geetha reviews the WaterCredit Loan card from a member of a women's self-help group.

528 families to construct toilets and gain necessary information on hygiene over a two-year period.

Geetha's success in working at the field level, paired with her determination and dedication, soon won her promotion to executive director when her mentor Mr. S. Damodaran stepped down to become WaterPartners' South Asia Country Director.

From Gramalaya Beneficiary to Executive Director

Today, in her role as executive director, the 32-year-old Geetha draws on her experiences as a beneficiary and field worker and feels strongly that it's important to stay connected with the people Gramalaya is helping. In fact, she still dedicates three days a week to spend in the field with future beneficiaries. She leads a staff of 126 and is responsible for activating Gramalaya's ambitious five-year strategic plan, which includes the goal of reaching 500,000 beneficiaries in the coming year alone. Geetha also directs the mobilization of more than 1,000

self-help groups and runs one of the most effective – and tightly managed – revolving loan fund schemes in the non-governmental sector.

Helping Women Source of Joy

Geetha explains the satisfaction she receives from the re-

sults of her work, "I can see visible changes in [women's] lifestyles and improvements in their standard of living. Women also have better access to banks and financial resources. This gives me job satisfaction and makes me happy in what I do." ■

In Praise of the Humble Toilet

Efforts Underway to Raise Awareness of the Importance of Sanitation

Toilets are a subject no one really wants to talk about. Or, when toilets do enter the discussion, it's often in the context of a joke. They're the Rodney Dangerfield of public health—they don't get any respect.

But all jokes aside, toilets are a serious matter and deserve as prominent a place in our global public health discourse as they do in our daily routine. Worldwide, about 42 percent of the population, or 2.6 billion people, don't have proper sanitation. Instead, most of these people defecate in open spaces or bodies of water. These unhygienic practices result in disease and even death. Each year, diarrhea alone claims the lives of about two million people – mostly children under age five.

Just a little over one hundred years ago, the situation was not much better in western countries. New York, London, and Paris were centers of infectious disease, with diarrhea, dysentery and typhoid fever undermining public health. Child death rates were as high then as they are now in much of Sub-Saharan Africa. But sweeping reforms in water and sanitation signaled a giant leap forward in human progress—so much so that a 2007 poll by the British Medical Journal found that clean water and sanitation represented the most important medical advancement since 1840.

Unfortunately, much of the developing world has not shared in these advances—or their benefits. But WaterPartners and its partner organizations are doing all they can to educate the public that the inter-related issue of water and sanitation is the single biggest health problem in the world.

Toilet Technology Center an Important Resource

In India, for example, WaterPartners' partner organization Gramalaya has taken a leading role in addressing the sanitation needs of the people in and around Tiruchirapalli. With funds from WaterPartners, which came in part from the Bruce Campbell Family Foundation, Gramalaya has developed the Centre for Toilet Technology and Training.

continued on Page 12

Editor's Note:

WaterPartners International, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization, provides safe drinking water and sanitation to people in developing countries. WaterPartners' projects create a ripple effect – saving lives, preventing illness and improving quality of life.

Ripples is published three times per year for friends of WaterPartners International. To subscribe or unsubscribe, contact *Ripples* editor Nicole Wickenhauser at (913) 312-8600, ext. 23, or nwick@water.org. Comments, questions and suggestions welcome.

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In Praise Of The Humble Toilet

continued from Page 11

The first center of its kind, it is located in Kolakudipatti village. It displays a variety of toilet models and also serves as an education and training resource on sanitation.

Center staff teaches visitors how they can construct “no cost” toilets by using locally available materials. All models are based on designs that have been successfully utilized in practical settings, and staff arranges field trips for visitors to villages using the designs. The staff encourages visitors to add to its wide variety of toilet types –flush, no-flush, child-friendly, etc. – by creating innovative, locale-specific models using local materials in their own communities.

The Centre for Toilet Technology and Training is a model in the water and sanitation sector. It has greatly increased the number of local communities us-



ing toilets and has bolstered understanding of the link between sanitation, hygiene and good health. Because of its success, WaterPartners is funding the future expansion of the center to include the addition of accommodations for overnight visitors.

In India as elsewhere, the more people and communities that understand the importance of toilets and proper hygiene, the better off the society. ■



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