

Articles for Environmental Health News December 2007

Water for Kids trip to Zambia

As I scrape the ice from the windscreen of my car, it's hard to believe that only a month ago I was in Zambia taking part in one of Water for Kids largest projects so far.

On 19 October 2007, Caroline Maffia, myself and 14 other individuals formed a motley crew consisting of designers, plumbers, builders, electricians, teachers, builders and EHPs. We had volunteered to spend two weeks working on the Water for Kids project in Kamaila village, an hour's drive from Zambia's capital Lusaka.

There was an air of excitement and anticipation amongst the group as we bumped along the dirt track, for the first time, on a bus with no suspension. Three hours later after a meeting with the mayor of Lusaka (operating on relaxed Zambia time!!) we were unsure what would be waiting for us as we arrived at Kamaila village school.

Everywhere we looked there were happy smiling faces. It was difficult to believe that after three hours of waiting the children were still sitting patiently under the shade of the trees, ready to welcome us. And what a welcome it was, with singing and dancing and even a play re-enacting the first day Water for Kids visited the village. As EHPs from Wigan Council we had to pinch ourselves to check that we were actually there.

After being welcomed at the school we were back on the bus and bumping along towards the village centre. Dressed in our Jitenge (women and David Beckham only!) we met the elders and were given a guided tour of the standpipes which were completed in July 2007.

The welcomes over with, it was time to start the hard work. The focus was on Kamaila School. We hoped to decorate the classrooms and provide the teenage girls with a washroom exclusively for their use. This would mean that they would no longer need to miss school for one week of every month once they reached puberty. Easy you may say - try working in temperatures averaging 35 degrees, with limited tools and supplies.

To construct the washroom we first had to excavate the pit. Using only shovels and pick axes, we dug down to a depth of two metres before supporting the walls with breeze block and excavating a further two metres of earth. At the same time, two concrete slabs were cast, containing the squat pans for the latrine. Once set, the slabs were manoeuvred into place (with great difficulty) over the mouth of the pit so that the construction of the walls and roof could begin. Fortunately we had the help of the local people who had better knowledge of how to build Zambia style!!! Valuable lessons were learnt including how to mix concrete and bed bricks when the mortar dries instantly!

Our local fellow builders were extremely surprised that women were helping with the building work and as a result had great respect for us – calling us sister. As a lasting memory they had their photographs taken with the two strong girls, myself and Caroline on the final day of our visit!!!

Whilst one team constructed the washroom, the other tackled the classrooms. There are six classrooms at the school in total. Four of these rooms had never been decorated and as a result were dark and dingy inside. The walls were cracked with large areas of plaster missing. The floors were uneven and contained large holes. It was difficult to believe that before the installation of clean water up to one hundred children had been taught in these classrooms. As a result of clean, reliable water the school has now been able to attract new teachers, therefore reducing class sizes to approximately 45 children. (The teachers live by the school and having a standpipe nearby improves their lives considerably.)

After sanding the walls and mastering the art of plastering we began the mammoth task of painting each room. However, it soon became apparent that without a ladder we would be unable to reach the tops of each wall. After completing a ladder safety training course days before leaving for Africa I found myself six foot in the air on a ladder made from two trees, a few nails and some wire – Blue Peter would have been proud!!

Through talking to villagers we became aware that a local village called Karubwe was without clean water due to a problem with their hand pump. The pump had been out of use for the last 4 years meaning that water was drawn from shallow, unprotected wells, several hours walk from the village. With £300 from Water for Kids and the aid of the immaculately dressed Mrs Ktutu, the water engineer (who had put on her best clothes in case any photos were taken!), we were able to repair the hand pump and restore clean water to over four hundred people.

None of this would have been possible without the team spirit, including that of the local people and teachers who took part, and the help of Water for Kids. If I remember just one thing about my trip to Africa it would be this – knowing that I actually contributed to improving the lives of people in this village, some of whom will have never had clean water.

It is extremely difficult to explain in such a small number of words the fantastic time we had whilst we were in Zambia. When the blisters started to appear and our enthusiasm began to waiver, the constant crowd of smiling children at the doorway gave us the lift we needed and a reason to continue. Half my heart is still in Africa and as I finish writing this article I'm still humming 'We welcome you to Kamaila', as the children sang to us on our arrival,... when can we go back??

Andrea Smith

Water for all in Kamaila

On 31 October 2007 Water for Kids at the Zambian Institute of Environmental Health (ZIEH) handed over the completed water installation to the Kamaila village Water Committee. The clean water is pumped using solar power to standpipes throughout the village and to taps at the school, for use by four thousand people. The occasion was marked with local children singing and dancing. The village headman said that the water system is not something you see in villages in Zambia, but only in towns, and that it is "just the beginning of development".

The clean water not only improves the health of the people, but also frees up the time taken in the past to collect water. This time along with the availability of water for construction and farming can help relieve poverty. In addition the availability of clean water has led to the government agreeing to build a clinic in Kamaila; it is much needed as the nearest clinic is 18 km away.

Natasha Franklin and Sara Emanuel also gave out seventy wash stands to families who had started building their latrines and six to the school. The wash stands had been bought by supporters of Water for Kids as Christmas or birthday gifts for their friends. The ceremony ended with a presentation of the village traditional gift of thanks: three live hens.

It is now time for Water for Kids and ZIEH to use the expertise gained in Kamaila to provide much needed water for other communities in Zambia. During the trip two possible new projects were identified one to provide a borehole with hand pump and latrines for a community on the edge of Lusaka and a second to provide a water supply to a busy rural clinic

Achievements

In just two weeks the group

- built a wash-room for girls at Kamaila school
- painted three classrooms and two fabulous murals
- repaired the water pump in a Karubwe village
- consulted EHOs at Lusaka City Council on the design of an environmental health field pack to be produced in Zambia
- gave laptops (donated by Civica Plc) to Kamaila school and to colleges teaching environmental health courses

To find out more about Water for Kids see www.waterforkids.org

