

## Water for Kids in Peru

Memories of my first field trip with WfK – Donna Telfer

I spent three incredible weeks in Peru in the autumn of 2003 and learnt a lot about the work of Water for Kids and how it had impacted on a number of the Peruvian communities. I had wanted to attend this field trip for some time and given my professional background in adult and health education and promotion, I was keen to see how my skills could be put to some good use during the trip.

### Quebrada Verde

Water for Kids had been providing assistance to a community in a rural hillside area in Lima, the capital of Peru, for a few years by the time I visited. One muggy afternoon in October 2003 I was taken to see my first glimpse of how Water for Kids had helped to make some significant changes to the lives of a needy and very proud Peruvian community.



Extracts from my field trip journal:

'...by the time we arrived in Quebrada Verde (QV) it was after 5pm and the sun was rapidly sinking over the Peruvian hills behind this remote, somewhat isolated rural village perched high up overlooking the coastal waters of Lima. As we approached the village the poor concrete road, full of potholes gave way to a gravel dirt track that led us upwards towards the entrance, where the wooden gateway was overshadowed by an enormous smart green sign greeting visitors and residents to Quebrada Verde ( Green Gorge ). We were met by Maria, our guide from the QV community, who beamed with enthusiasm and pride as she welcomed us to her village.'

*My first impressions were:*

*abject poverty – shacks for houses, no proper roads just dirt and sand roadways, except for one or two central small roads made of concrete and tar*

*lots of livestock held in well ordered home made pens*

*Grandmother and child riding down the hill from the livestock pens, on their donkey.... '*

The village sprawled across the side of the hillside and consisted of 2 small schools, rows of shack built, tin roofed houses and other community buildings including a communal kitchen, run by a key community village committee member, called Alicia. Apparently Alicia is really clever in her organising of the community cooking rota (a traditional practice in poorer rural Peruvian communities) in that she ensures the mothers of the poorest families get to cook for the rest of the community more frequently, as when it is their turn to cook they and their children get to eat for free. They buy their staple food (lentils, beans and rice) in bulk from USAID food supplies and thus keep the costs down. The water tower funded by Water for Kids sat high in the hills next to the QV village and the pump that feeds it takes its water from the fresh water river constantly replenishing its supply.



*'Maria went on to show us two income generating schemes in the village, one was the livestock, all owned by individual families and tended to through a communal approach. They had been able to increase their livestock ten times over since they had the fresh water available. The Water for Kids project here had meant that since they have had a regular supply of clean water, the children and their families had not been subject to constant diarrhoea and had therefore been able to tend to the animals more readily – such was the success that the villagers were now providing cows and goats milk to local cooperatives and to the local milk company for the production of milk portions and cheese-making. The second successful scheme was a snail farm again run by the villages, providing a continual supply of fresh snails as a much sought after delicacy to the local hotels, again only made possible since the village has had a reliable fresh water supply.'*

A wonderful example of the success Water for Kids had had by helping to provide a community with the means to access essential clean safe water; helping them to become self sufficient from their own sustainable efforts, not to mention how the clean water had evidently improved theirs and their animal's health too!

### **Pucallpa and the Water for Kids rural projects**

The Water for Kids field trip was organised with the intention of visiting a number of villages in Pucallpa, a remote Northeastern region of Peru, close to the Amazonian jungle and specifically to undertake an epidemiological water usage survey in some of the most isolated and poorest communities.

Although only one hours' flying time Northeast from Lima, over the other side of the Andes, it became apparent during the brief flight how much more remote and poorer the more Northern areas of Peru were, compared to the relative affluence of the south (although clearly still not at all affluent by our UK standards).

Pucallpa turned out to be a very interesting shanty like town, where you most certainly would not want to venture out alone at night! We were to stay in a very basic hotel in the centre of the town as a base for our daily visits to the many rural villages planned in our 2-week plus stay.

We soon met up with Scott, the Water for Kids field worker, who had spent the past fifteen months in Pucallpa working hard to develop the Water for Kids project in partnership with a UK local Rotary Club and jointly funded by USA Rotary Clubs. It soon became clear that much of the International Rotary Club funding was running out and that sustainability in the approach in working with local communities was becoming paramount, it was going to be an interesting trip!



Over the next fourteen days or so we visited many different communities and villages and only it turned out, a handful of those that Water for Kids had been working with and these being some sixty or so, of a total of more than 200 that were in need of support, having no clean safe water supply. It was a shock to the system (at least to mine) to see so many people living in poverty, with little or no safe, clean water and the devastating effects this was having on their lives, especially on the children.

It wasn't long before my skills and stamina were put to the test. The survey we had come to do was going to be vital in gathering some much needed epidemiological data on how the villagers were accessing their water where there was no Water for Kids or other funding support. We also surveyed those villages where there was clean safe water available and the consequent impact on both 'before and after', in terms of sickness and other things like the children's school absenteeism. Engaging with the community was vital in conducting the survey and many days were spent visiting various villages, first 'training-up' keen and enthusiastic members of

the communities and then collating all the important data and information gathered.

Key to the success of the Water for Kids schemes in many of the villages, was not just that the funding had helped to provide the materials and costs to commission bore holes and the building of pit latrines, but also water towers, pumps and a valuable contribution to the costs of three PH nurses.

With the hard work and expertise of the local PH nurses, with a little help from the Environmental Health practitioners on the trip, we built compost bins from scrap wood and any other materials the villagers could find lying around. The PH nurses then explained the difference between organic and non-organic material and showed everyone what types of waste you could put into the composter. There was a lot of interest from adults and children alike in this new idea.



My job, whilst other field trippers were busy with the survey and drawing maps of the villages (to indicate current sources and access routes to water supplies), was to work with the children on the much needed hygiene and health education aspects of the project.



In one of the villages I was welcomed by the village priest and offered the one and only community room for our health education class; the village church! I had gone prepared and taken with me supplies of crayons, pencils and scrap usable paper, we were going to have a health education competition for the children... As soon as I got started, however, there was so much interest from the villages that mums and dads and eventually whole families were joining in the fun!

The children (and many of the grown-ups!) designed and produced posters for the rest of the villages to promote the use of the composters we had seen built and demonstrated earlier. It was a great way to see if the information given by the PH nurses had been taken up by the children. It turned out many of the villagers were really enthusiastic about the whole idea of making use of their waste materials in this way and evident in their excitement and involvement in the poster competition.

We were later to visit villages that had been building and using their composters for some time and the effect on them and the village environment was obvious,

In other villages WFK (with support funding from the Rotary Clubs) had been able to build much needed latrines or enclosed toilets for village school children and one village school latrine in particular turned out to be really important. We visited a very isolated community of native Peruvian Indians on the very edge of the Amazonian jungle. It was explained to us that these people had had to leave their home place, deep inside the jungle where they had lived for generations, due the devastating deforestation that had been going on for some time (to make way for

beef cattle-grazing land). They had been left with little choice but to leave, since their habitat and means of continuing survival in their jungle homes had now become impossible.

The small rural village called Nueva San Juan was made up of a tiny community of native Peruvian Indians known as the Shipibo tribe with the village having grown in the past year from 35 to 56 dwellings. During our all important visit the EHPs undertook to complete a map of the village to determine the best positions for the planned water tower, standpipes and distribution lines, whilst other field trippers completed the water usage survey, proving to be particularly challenging! The Shipibo people have their own native Indian language called Tarapo and do not speak the more commonly used local Quechua (a kind of Peruvian Spanish) language. Through the means of a number of translators they were able to successfully complete 100% of the surveys with all 56 of the village households. An amazing feat!

*'Meanwhile, I was taken by the village one and only school teacher, Professor Amelio (who was dressed in a beautiful traditional Shipibo tunic – brown fabric dyed with vegetables and painted with typical geometric designs) into the tiny school, consisting of one room built from straw and rough wooden walls topped with a thin, patchy tin roof.*

*My task was to teach the local village children how to use the new (dry pit-type) latrines properly, the building of which had just been finished that week. The WFKs project had provided the funding for the latrines right next to the school, including a urinal for the boys and a wash hand-basin with running water. Next Saturday is the official opening of the latrine (this will be a very important event for the community and the children seemed to be very excited about soon being able to use it).*

*With the invaluable help of Thomas, an English speaking translator, we asked the Professor if we could speak to the children about the latrines and maybe do a little competition with them. The professor eagerly agreed and we explained to the children how to use the new latrines by drawing pictures on the blackboard, explaining the need to use the sawdust after they had used them and of the importance of washing their hands properly afterwards every time. The children were really excited about the new latrines and told me how much they love to come to school and how had been talking about today and they made sure they used the latrines properly and washed their hands well, that they probably wouldn't get sick so often and then not have to miss so much school. They cheered!*

*We then did a competition making up posters on what the younger children would like their school garden to look like (the next planned development, once they have their own clean water supply). The older children meanwhile designed some super posters for the younger children to remind them how to use the latrines properly and included pictures to show them how they must wash their hands. Again, even some of the adults joined in with the competition, having joined us in the tiny school room to see what all the excitement was about.*

*Before we left the school, after our afternoon of health education and English language lessons (the children had wanted to know the English words for school, toilet, wee, poo, latrine, wash, hands, and English numbers 1-10, etc...) and the all important prize-giving, we were treated to some wonderful singing by all the children. First a song in their own traditional Tarapo language, then in Spanish and then an English version of 'Fare Shaka', it was quite wonderful and a lovely way to complete our time with these very special people.'*



A number of the other villages we were to visit in the remaining time we had in Pucallpa had had varying amounts of funding and support. Those that had had support for some time, had created their own village Water Committees, had regular supplies of fresh, clean water and were gradually becoming sustainable in maintaining the water towers, pumps and in the production and sale of chlorine to the other villagers and in some cases to neighbouring villages.

### **What a difference water makes....**

The effect on these villages and on the health of the people was evident. As we drove into the villages where they had had fresh, clean supplies of water for some while, the roadways were clear of rubbish and the whole village was green. Green because the villagers were maximising their water supplies by growing and tending their much loved gardens, making use of their numerous composters and managing successfully in growing their own food.

*'One village in particular stood out for me, called Santa Rosa De Lima. They had been so successful they had built their own communal garden, including wooden benches and sunshades. The garden was abundant with beautiful brightly coloured flowers....*

*I was swept up by two young girls called Emma and Alicia and they eagerly took me to meet their mum and the other villagers, proudly showing me their houses, some with their own water standpipes outside their front gardens. They were so happy and full of smiles and welcomed me into their homes and gardens. Despite their obvious hardships, including the shabby tin roofed one or two roomed houses (that I expect leaks very badly in the rainy season) with dirt floors and little comforts, these Peruvian people have great resilience and a sense of inner strength and well-being that I couldn't help but be 'blown away' by. Without them even realising it, their overwhelming kindness and generosity, for people who had virtually nothing material to give, made me feel very humble indeed.'*

Water for Kids may have helped initially to provide safe, fresh water to these people, but like all good, strong and prosperous communities it had evidently been down to them for the water to really make a big and sustainable difference, not just to individuals in the village, but to the great benefit of the whole community.

