



Voices from the Field: Promoting Safe Water & Hygiene in Malawi

By Amanda Gawne, Cuso Volunteer, Malawi (November 2018)

When water, particularly clean water, is scarce, it has far-reaching impacts on health and wellbeing. The slightest bit of contamination can have debilitating consequences on families and communities, resulting in days of missed work and school. In places where clean water does not flow through the simple turn of the tap, the work of collecting safe water becomes a focal point of a day's work. In Malawi, as in most of Southern Africa, the work of collecting water is a women's job, a responsibility that shapes the lives of women and girls in the villages.

This critical work is both physically exhausting and time consuming. The daily task of accessing water can, however, be made safer and less burdensome by the installation of community hand pumps. These hand pumps are placed over large boreholes drilled deep into the water table. The hand pumps are placed strategically throughout communities, with one hand pump serving on average 150 households, providing water to hundreds of individuals.

In Malawi, the Southern African Nutrition (SANI) project is working closely with established community structures to help monitor and maintain pre-established pumps to ensure continuous access to clean water. To do this, the SANI project is working with the local Water Point Committees, self-organized groups who take responsibility for maintaining one or several water pumps in their areas. The committees collect money from the household users (typically 100 kwacha per household / less than \$0.20 CAD) to perform regular maintenance and repairs when needed. The committees are self-informed but benefit from the inputs of NGO and district government workers who support repairs and share valuable knowledge.



FIGURE 1: Working together to dismantle a water pump at the community training.

Last week, the SANI team was facilitating Community-based Management training on the monitoring and repair of the local hand pumps. The aim of this training is to increase the capacity of SANI project field officers and local water point committees to monitor, clean and repair water points and hand pumps in their areas.

While visiting the water points with the SANI team, I was struck by how valued the hand pumps are to the communities, particularly by the women and girls, whose days are drastically changed by the availability of a working pump in their area. They demonstrate how to swiftly push down and release clear, bright water to fill their large colorful buckets. One woman puts my hands on the pump so I can try for myself, and I am shocked at how strenuous the pumping is relative to how easy the women make it look.

The **SOUTHERN AFRICA NUTRITION INITIATIVE (SANI)** is a 24,652,087 million CAD project to address undernutrition in women of reproductive age (15-49) and children under 5 in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia. SANI is a partnership between CARE, Cuso International, the Interagency Coalition on AIDS and Development (ICAD), McGill University, and the Governments of implementing countries. The project is funded by the Government of Canada, CARE, and the Canadian public. SANI is a four-year and six-month project, from March 2016 to September 2020.



FIGURE 2: Women and girls walk for kilometers to get water if the pumps are broken.



FIGURE 3: The Area Mechanic carefully trains the Field Officers in water pump repair.

A small girl who looks not much older than seven or eight, giggles as she takes the bucket I have just filled and demonstrates how she will carry it home perched on the top of head. I watch the young girl walk off, following her mother; the mother carries her own multi-gallon bucket above her head while also carrying a baby tied to her back. Through my translator, I ask another woman at the pump how far the mother and daughter will walk to reach home — not far, I am told, less than one kilometer. As I consider this “less than one kilometer” relative to the five feet between my kitchen faucet and my kitchen table, a woman begins to explain to me that this short distance between home and the pump is one of the main reasons why this pump is so important. She explains that with her first few children, she would walk many kilometers to a nearby river carrying water that she was not always sure was safe for her children. As she pats the bottom of her youngest sleeping on her back, she says that since the pump was put in she knows the water is good, and she has more time to prepare good food and meet with neighbors. She said that when the pump is not working they have to again go the long way to the river. She explains that, this is why she joined the water point committee, she wants to be sure that the pump is never broken.

At the pump, I watched as the District Water Development Officers and an Area Mechanic worked with the SANI field officers and members of local water point committee to take apart the hand pump. Together, they worked as a team to carefully remove, inspect and clean each part; attention was taken to ensure that everyone knew what to look for, how to clean the parts taking sand and earth to scrub the metal pieces, and then how to repair any small broken components. Finally, everyone worked together to put the pump back in working order.

Watching this event, I was struck by the group’s coordinated effort and the level of care and attention paid to the training. For me, it demonstrated how valued the hand pumps are and it emphasized the importance of the pumps clean flowing water. This observation highlighted to me the clear links between nutrition and supporting improved water, sanitation and hygiene. Another reminder that food, and the production of food, are not the sole parameters that define nutrition — it requires a more holistic approach in order to make lasting change.



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