

Health, hygiene and a little bit of privacy

Rainwater harvesting and local livelihoods in Southern Sri Lanka

Suzanna Lipscombe's first report for the Malteser International Lent Campaign 2008: "40 Euros for Sri Lanka"

Today, we are on the way from our office in Galle to Nakulugamuwa, a small village situated on the south coast of Sri Lanka. We go there for a monitoring visit to see the completed rainwater harvesting tanks and how the people make use of them. When we arrive at the village, we witness a common scene here in Sri Lanka: a large public well being used by both men and women for bathing. We ask them if they also use this well for drinking, but they explain that they prefer water from a different well because this one could have become contaminated from all the washing that goes on around it...

Nakulugamuwa lies on the border between Matara and Hambantota Districts. Given this location, the respective Water Board offices in each district tend to think that the other has the responsibility for the area. Therefore, the village has not yet been connected to the national piped-water network, and may continue to wait a while longer. So meanwhile, the community continue to walk long distances, at least half an hour at best, sometimes up to five times a day, to collect drinking water from the preferred open-dug well for their water supply. In total, only 30 percent of Sri Lanka's population have access to improved pipe water supply. In villages where pipe water is available, the supply is often not reliable and quite costly.

We then walk to the first of 50 houses in the village to have received a rainwater harvesting tank. All tanks have been built together with the families, and it's always interesting to meet them and hear how rainwater harvesting has made a difference to their daily lives.

Here, we meet Mrs Kusumawathie and her neighbour Mrs Piyadasa who live at the top of the hill and are involved in the local pottery industry. I watch as Mrs Kusumawathie moulds pots on her potter's wheel that is being spun by her neighbour. She is making clay cooking pots and has about 200 already stacked high in her small workshop ready for firing. For each pot - she explains - she makes about 12 Sri Lankan Rupees (about 8 Euro Cents), which - considering the amount of effort involved - seems a bargain in favour of the customer. Nevertheless, she and Mrs Piyadasa, who makes smaller cups that are used as miniature oil lamps, enjoy the activity and the small revenue it brings.

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It is incredibly positive to observe their enthusiasm, creativity and constructiveness, not only in their work, but also with regard to the care taken to make their new water tanks part of their homes. Mrs Kusumawathie has painted her tank white, planted some flowers around its base, and with her husband she has constructed a spacious drainage area around it. They are also planning to connect a pipe from the tank to their nearby latrine to allow for flushing and hand washing.

This is always a good sign when introducing a new technology to a community. It shows that they do not only appreciate it, but that they are also proud of having it. This contributes to the sustainability of the project as it demonstrates the beneficiary's willingness to use and maintain it.

Rainwater harvesting is an environmental friendly, cost effective and simple activity which can be undertaken by anyone everywhere. Properly stored and treated rainwater is suitable for drinking. It can also be used for cooking, washing, cleaning, home gardening and sanitation purposes. A rainwater harvesting system is an independent entity with water transporting gutters and pipes, a tank and a filter. Our three years' project aims at constructing rainwater harvesting tanks of 5,000 or 8,000 litres capacity for 3,500 families in the Districts of Galle, Matara, Hambantota and Ampara. The beneficiaries themselves participate in the construction process and are trained for the operation and maintenance of the rain water harvesting systems.

“By having the tank next to our house”, Mrs Piyadasa and Mrs Kusumawathie explain, “we no longer need to walk so far, and so often, to collect water for drinking, washing, and for our livelihood.” I ask if they now enjoy the privacy of bathing in their house - as opposed to the well in the middle of the village. “Oh yes, that as well!”, the two women begin to chuckle.

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