

Safe drinking water from the roof

How rainwater harvesting helps elderly and disabled people in Sri Lanka

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

It's been an incredibly busy week, with a lot of site visits to monitor the 400 completed rain water harvesting tanks in Matara and Hambantota Districts. Today, we are on the way to the remote small village of Kosmodara. After a long, uncomfortable drive along some very bumpy roads, I am glad of the walk to the project site.

As we walk along the track adjacent to a number of paddy fields in the valley, we pass a few young women on their way home, and one of them, 17 year old Nilini, asks us if we need any help in finding the rainwater tanks. She takes us to her house, where she lives with her aunt (we later found out that both her parents died when she was very young, and has lived with her aunt ever since). As we walk from house to house inspecting each of the 20 tanks in Kosmodara, we meet the families and hear their stories of struggles with their water supply. "The nearest well for drinking water is over one kilometre walk down steep paths, a journey that we make at least four times a day", one of the families tells us. "However, now that we have a 5m³ tank we can collect water directly from the roof, and only need to walk a few metres to access it."

Today it struck me just how much effort goes in to collecting such a valuable part of anyone's daily life. We start walking up an incredibly steep slope towards a group of five houses on a ridge along the highest point in the hamlet. It is just after midday and already very hot, and trekking up these steep slopes brings on a constant sweat and heavy panting! All the while, a very enthusiastic, petite elderly lady (Mrs. Gunadasa - she must be in her seventies) is hot on my heels and evidently much fitter than I am! She must have been doing this trek a number of times every day since she was a young girl – a harsh reality that highlights the luxury we have with running water in our kitchens, toilets and showers. When we reach her house, she prays thanks for the tank she has just received and how it has changed her life. "I am now drinking the rainwater, and I am very happy to do so", Mrs. Gunadasa tells us.

I found that the majority of the households we visited this week were already making the most of the drinking water that their new tanks provided. Many of them have been 'harvesting rainwater' for some time in one form or another, collecting it in plastic jerry cans or large oil drums, and I even saw one house using a tea strainer to filter out dust and dirt from the roof as a first flush. But with the introduction of a new, large tank with an in-built filter, our project is able to offer a more permanent structure that will provide water for these families for a number of years to come.

In the final households we visit lives a 75 year old disabled Mrs. Amarasena, who can only walk with the aid of a cane. Her daughter lives next door and Mrs. Amarasena explains: "Previously I had to rely on my daughter to collect water from the well at

the bottom of the steep hill, as I was not able to do the journey myself. But now, with my own RWH tank, I can be more independent in this regard.” And instead, she anticipates her daughter would come to her house to share her water supply!

What is so nice about this hamlet is that everyone is so friendly and helpful - they are all more than happy to accompany Fernando and I as we carry out our activities, showing us the way to the next house, and offering us *thambili* (king coconut) as a refreshment in the hot sun. All the beneficiaries know each other, despite some living on different sides of the steep valley, and appear close with a strong community spirit.

As we say our goodbyes, the question comes up from the community leader regarding the possibility of additional tanks: “Some families in the neighbouring village have heard of the project and want to find out how they could get involved.” With limited funds and the remaining tanks already allocated, I find myself in a horrible position of not being able to say ‘yes’ to everyone. But maybe, the money collected with this Lent Campaign can help us to enable more families to build those beneficial tanks.

We now have to travel back to Galle, an uncomfortable journey that you accept to make, particularly after the humble experience of today. Things could be worse...