

Simple methods for safe water

How already children in Sri Lanka learn to keep their water clean

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

Today, my colleagues Subhanie, Lalanga, Wasanthi from the Water Safety Plan team, Fernando and I go to Peelahena, a small community in Mulatiyana Division of Matara District. We want to give the community training on hygiene and show them how to maintain their Rainwater Harvesting (RWH) Tanks...Our messages are conveyed through colourful drawings and interaction with the community.

When we arrive at the village, the crowds are already waiting! They are all keen to learn more about their new RWH tank. There is always a strong attendance level, both by the men and women and the children are also very attentive – they must like the drawings! One young girl, Maleeka, has already followed one of our training sessions and is proud to explain to the other children the advantages of the new tanks: “The tank gets filled when it rains. We keep this lid open as the roof and gutter can contaminate the first part of the rain. When we are sure that the roof and the gutters are thoroughly washed we close this lid and allow the water to go to the tank.”. But she even knows more about the complex system: “There is a basket inside the filter. That basket has pebbles and charcoal and holes to get water filtered to the tank so that we can get filtered water from the tank. The covering lid on the tank is used as an entrance for cleaning purposes and that lid must be kept sealed. Otherwise insects will enter the tank.”

We provide guidance on how often to clean the guttering and the inside of the tank, the importance of keeping the roof free of leaves and debris, and which elements can influence the overall quality of the water collected. The key message is the use of the “first flush”. Debris, dust, droppings and dirt washed from the roof during the first rainfall after a dry spell can reduce the quality of the collected water. To divert this ‘first flush’ the guttering along the side of the roof is designed to channel water towards a downpipe with a removable plug at its base. The plug is inserted after about 15 minutes of rainfall, allowing ‘clean’ rainwater to then pass through to the tank via a bucket of filter media

Subhanie, Lalanga and Wasanthi then introduce the beneficiaries to the H₂S testing kit (that shows if the water is safe for drinking), and the different household water treatment methods and safe hygiene practices that aim to ensure that their new water supply and its quality are kept safe. The audience observe how the small bottle changes colour when mixed with a sample of rainwater, and although it takes a while before you can be sure of the result, early indications show that it is safe to drink. I am sitting next to a young mother. One of her friends has been late and so, the young lady proudly shares her new knowledge: “We can get to know about the water from the test, where it is safe to drink or not. Actually it is very simple. And we can get the results of this test within two days.” This is an important step in encouraging

acceptance amongst the community that RWH is a valuable alternative water source for them.

For any development project to be sustainable, an organisation needs to involve the community in all stages of planning and implementation, and include training in operation and maintenance of the new system. This way you encourage the beneficiaries to feel more ownership and therefore responsibility over their new tank, which will ultimately encourage its long term use and maintenance.

The workshop finishes after about an hour and a half, and one of the villagers kindly offers us a thambili (king coconut) in thanks for the presentation.