

By Their Own Hands:

Healthy Villages in the Democratic Republic of the Congo



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OVERVIEW

In poor countries, children are dying needlessly every day. Take the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), which has one of the highest child mortality rates in the world. One reason is the widespread lack of clean water and proper sanitation facilities. Thanks to years of conflict and a crumbling, or even nonexistent infrastructure, more than half of the country's 30 million people do not have clean drinking water. Only 30 percent of the entire country has access to sanitation. Without these necessities, families struggle with the most basic hygiene practices. Children are vulnerable to frequent illness and diseases such as diarrhea and cholera. In rural areas, where health education and services are scarce, children are far more likely to die from these preventable causes.

UNICEF IN ACTION

UNICEF has partnered with the Congolese government and other nongovernmental organizations to reduce child mortality and transform communities in the DRC into "Healthy Villages." Through this program, villages work with UNICEF staff to address their challenges with water and sanitation. UNICEF provides the materials, technical guidance, and education. Specifically, UNICEF supports their efforts to build and maintain basic systems to provide clean water to the village, as well as build and maintain a simple latrine for every village home.

Getting this work done requires organization, and each community elects a village health committee to oversee the process. One key component is a contract that is made between each committee and local government. The contract empowers communities to improve their situation and allows local governments to take ownership of the process.

Once a village fulfills a set of criteria that includes adequate sanitation and full access to clean water, it is certified as "healthy." Many villages take the program even further, building on their success to achieve other goals. They teach other communities what they have learned. They take on new projects, such as installing village showers, building schools, and improving agricultural techniques. They come up with their own solutions.

RESULTS

- Since the program began in 2008, almost 1,100 villages with 750,000 people have taken part in the Healthy Village program, gaining access to clean water, improved sanitation, and hygiene.
- In 2010, more than 550,000 people in 606 communities attained Healthy Village status as changes in communications strategy helped improve program visibility.
- Since this program began, there has been a reduction in the child diarrhea morbidity rate in target villages, from 26 to 6 percent.
- UNICEF worked with implementing partners in conflict and epidemic-affected areas to provide emergency WASH assistance to over 588,000 affected persons and access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities for 94,000 displaced persons.

"Healthy villages are important because they save the lives of children. A family that lives in a healthy village also adopts key practices like hand-washing, breastfeeding, immunizations, use of insecticide-treated mosquito nets and treating diarrhea."

— Philippe Barragne-Bigot, UNICEF Chief of Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in the DRC



IMPACT OF YOUR SUPPORT

With the support of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (GFWC), UNICEF will continue its Healthy Villages program in Bas Congo and Eastern Zone, reaching approximately 6,650 people in 10 villages from 2012 – 2015. The support from GFWC and other partners will allow UNICEF to:

- Train health committees, including pre and post-village assessment and planning
- Construct water points and family latrines for each family in ten villages, reaching as many as 6,650 people
- Monitor each community’s progress and achievement of goals, providing guidance for troubleshooting and sharing best practices
- Roll out hygiene promotion campaigns with door-to-door community volunteers and health agents focused on teaching proper healthy habits like handwashing with soap
- Train community groups on the management, operation and maintenance of water and sanitation infrastructures
- Support the government’s Ministry of Health with supplies and logistical expertise

These are challenging times for mothers and children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. But UNICEF’s work with the Congolese government and other partners to provide water, sanitation, and empowering knowledge about disease prevention gives hope that in the future, cholera and diarrhea will no longer kill children in the DRC. UNICEF has saved more young lives than any other humanitarian organization in the world. By supporting and investing in UNICEF’s work, you are bringing us closer to the day when zero children die from preventable causes.

To donate or learn more about UNICEF’s Healthy Villages in the DRC, please visit unicefusa.org/gfwc.

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