

In DR Congo, a UNICEF program is empowering communities to improve water and sanitation

By Edward Bally

KINSHASA, Democratic Republic of the Congo, 23 March 2012 – Years of civil war have limited progress in improving health and sanitation services throughout the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Today, half the population of 66 million still has no access to clean water sources, and one out of every five children under age 5 suffers from persistent diarrhea.

Cholera outbreak

Since March 2011, the country has also faced a deadly cholera epidemic: In the past 12 months, more than 22,000 cases have been reported, and more than 500 people have been killed. In the past three months alone, the World Health Organization (WHO) has registered more than 5,600 cases. In response to the emergency, UNICEF and its partners are supporting health centers dedicated to the care of cholera-affected patients.

In Maluku, a village along the river separating DRC from the Republic of the Congo, UNICEF and partners have built a specialized center to respond to the epidemic. More than 200 cases have been successfully treated in this center between July and December 2011.

UNICEF is also supporting a national program designed to help villages prevent the outbreak of water- and sanitation-related diseases. Using marketing techniques and community commitments, the Healthy Villages programme seeks to empower villagers to improve and maintain their own sanitation systems and to adopt healthy hygiene practices.

Healthy Village

The village of Mbimbi, 40 km from Kinshasa, has recently been deemed a 'Healthy Village' through this program. The status means that the fundamental health and sanitation improvements have been made, such as the installation of a clean water source and proper latrines, and the provision of soap or ashes to wash hands.

The villagers have elected a committee to regularly discuss and address the village's sanitation needs. Odon Charles Kufunda, secretary of the Mbimbi Healthy Village committee, works with other committee members to ensure villagers are applying the recommendations of the Healthy Villages program.



"We see how the population handles the messages we deliver, so that the village remains clean and sanitized," he explained. "We also sensitize the population to be responsible on their own, to handle things so that tomorrow will be better in our village – for us, our children and the surrounding areas."

Once a village is certified 'Healthy', UNICEF and partners regularly visit to ensure that sanitation improvements are being maintained and hygiene messages are being disseminated.

UNICEF Water and Sanitation specialist Robert Geilmo regularly comes to Mbimbi to inspect sanitation facilities. "The main purpose of our visit here is to give a sense of responsibility to the community because they have to be in charge of their sanitation," he said. "That can only be achieved if someone comes to inform them of the importance of their actions. So we're here to accompany them and to raise awareness so that the community can fully seize the gains of this programme."

Today, more than 3,275 villages throughout the country have begun the process of becoming Healthy Villages.

Healthy schools

To reach children with these life-saving health messages, UNICEF has extended the Healthy Villages program to schools, creating the 'Healthy Schools' program.

The students of Kikimi School, near Mbimbi, are proud that their school has been awarded 'Healthy School' status. Here, children are regularly taught the basics of proper hygiene and sanitation, and are engaged in maintaining the cleanliness of their school.



Among the pupils are several 'brigadiers', children in charge of verifying that the school is properly looked after. Aimek Bakachika is the chief of the brigadiers, making sure her peers clean up the classes.

"If I see that the classroom hasn't been swept, I order one of my classmates to do it, or I do it," Aimek said. "Even in the school's courtyard, I make sure the garbage has been picked up. The cleanliness of our school is very important to me, to help avoid diseases and help take care of the environment."

About UNICEF

UNICEF has saved more children's lives than any other humanitarian organization in the world. Working in more than 150 countries, UNICEF provides children with health and immunizations, clean water, nutrition, education, emergency and disaster relief, and more. The U.S. Fund for UNICEF supports UNICEF's work through fundraising, advocacy, and education in the United States.

UNICEF is at the forefront of efforts to reduce child mortality worldwide. There has been substantial progress: the annual number of under-five deaths dropped from more than 12 million in 1990 to 7.6 million in 2010. But still, 21,000 children die each day from preventable causes. Our mission is to do whatever it takes to make that number zero by giving children the essentials for a safe and healthy childhood.