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News

Clean Water Project Improves Lives in Senegal

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Leona, Senegal

More than 13,000 people in northern Senegal now have ready access to safe drinking water thanks to a collaborative project between the government, Columbia University, and a U.S. manufacturer of plastic pipe. The project is having a big impact on the lives of women and children who used to spend hours carrying water from wells far from home.

Gaile Ndiaye remembers well waking before dawn in search of fresh water. She and the other girls from her village set off with their buckets, often walking several miles across the sandy soil of northern Senegal.

Ndiaye says when they did find a well with water, each girl took only two buckets so there would be enough for the rest of the village. It is a routine she repeated for years in this remote area near the Mauritanian border, her hands calloused by working the rough rope that drops down into the well's darkness.

Now her hands are smooth, and clean water flows from a tap just outside her door. More than 60 villages around the town of Leona have fresh water for drinking and non-potable water for irrigation through a project linking the Senegalese government, Columbia University, and the world's largest manufacturer of plastic pipe.

"Water, of course, is vital for life," said economist Jeffrey Sachs, director of Columbia University's Earth Institute. "If the water is not available locally, then women and children often spend many hours a day collecting water. It often means that children are not in school, they are out fetching water walking many miles in each direction to do so. The water that this community was drinking before the new water project was not safe water. It had high bacterial content. It means that the water could give rise to diarrheal diseases. It could be life threatening. Millions of children die each year from water-borne diseases," added Sachs, who serves as a special advisor to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon on meeting development goals.

Columbia University and the U.N. Development Program organized this work through the Millennium Villages Project, which helps more than 400,000 people across Africa.

Sachs says the project aims to show that the poorest and most remote areas of the world can achieve development goals through community-led, targeted investments in agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure, including roads, electricity, and clean water.

At Leona's market, women and children sell watermelon and bananas, groundnuts, apples, and coconut. A young man carves a side of beef hanging from a hook under a wooden stall roofed with dried palm fronds.

Gaile Ndiaye's mother Adama Ndiaye says the water project is revitalizing small-scale agriculture as more women are preparing vegetable gardens to feed their families and sell their surplus at market.

She says many young people left their village when the wells dried-up and the daily walk for water grew longer and longer. The water then was moldy and red, she says. Those were extremely difficult times but those days are now behind them. Ndiaye says there is an opportunity for many of those who left to come back, knowing there is a reliable supply of water for crops and livestock.

In addition to 81 new public taps there are eleven new animal troughs for cattle and goats. The villagers pay a small fee to maintain the water towers built by Senegal's government. For an additional charge, they can have the water piped straight to their house.

It's part of a public-private partnership that laid more than 100 kilometers of pipe in trenches dug by hand by village labor.

"I think as a human being, we are responsible to help others," said Walter Wang, whose JM Eagle Company donated nearly \$1 million worth of plastic pipe and employed two full-time engineers as part of what he says is a corporate obligation to make the world a better place. "Really a strong philosophy, a fundamental philosophy in our company is really not about profitability. We believe that profit comes in line with doing something else for others. Our ultimate goal is really to do something to help the world, and we believe very strongly that profit comes as long as we work toward that goal. Profit comes naturally."

Wang's company is working with the Millennium Villages Project to build similar water systems in Mali, Ghana, Uganda, Tanzania, and Rwanda with the goal of bringing accessible, clean water to more than 100,000 people.