Making a Difference

WATER: SOURCE OF LIFE AND CHANGE
ONE MILLION CISTERN PROGRAMME

Oxfam
Tuparetama is a small town of 8,000 inhabitants in the State of Pernambuco, northeast of Brazil. This is a semi-arid zone, a drought-stricken region where the people have to walk long distances to carry home small amounts of water, usually polluted water. Since 2003, the “One Million Cisterns Programme”, coordinated throughout Brazil by the Semi-Arid Coordination Network (ASA) and executed in the area by the NGO Diaconia(1) with Oxfam support, has enabled hundreds of families to build water tanks, or cisterns, to store rainwater, have clean water to drink, and more time to irrigate crops that will bring in an income to help them reach a better standard of living.

Three years ago a change was set in motion in the lives of a group of families in the communities of Bom Sucesso, Curral Velho dos Pedros, and Santo Domingo, in the semi-arid region of Pernambuco. The people here had a chance to take part in an extraordinary project for supplying themselves with clean water, involving the construction of tanks to store rainwater for drinking and cooking. The proposal was presented by the NGO Diaconia, which has been training them in the construction and maintenance of these rainwater tanks.

The training work brought to light the interest of the local population in finding out that it was possible to live healthily, attain a better quality of life, and fight against adversity with immediate results. Talks are given explaining to them how indispensable it is to “learn to live” in a region where there is no rainfall for 7 to 9 months of the year, and where surviving in good health implies taking advantage of Nature and absorbing from her all she has to offer.

The storage tanks are designed to collect the rain that falls torrentially for three or four months a year onto the rooftops of the houses. The rainwater is channelled into the cistern through a series of gutters. A cistern has a storage capacity of about 16 thousand litres, enough to supply a family of five members with water for eight months. The experience of these communities is added to that of dozens of others in 11 Brazilian States that are taking part in the One Million Cisterns Programme.

For 22-year-old Paulo Lopes, life has taken on a new meaning since the programme started. He was trained and took part in the construction of two of the cisterns that now supply his family with water so that they can enjoy a healthy life and have more free time to tend to their fields.

“The rainwater tanks and the underground wells have helped us to cope with the dry seasons and have a decent life. Now we can grow vegetables and fruit to sell on the market.” - PAULO LOPES, 22 years old

(1) While the examples of this leaflet are from Diaconia, Oxfam is also working in the programme with three other organisations; Caatinga, Centro Dom José Brandão Castro and Terra Viva.
The rainwater cisterns have revolutionised the lifestyle of the families. One immediately perceivable change is an improvement in the quality of life of the whole beneficiary family, who usually have to walk long distances every day to fetch water. Now, with the tanks, there is less illness caused by drinking polluted water, and the children can spend more time every day on their schoolwork and other activities. The families can invest their free time in farming activities all year long, producing both for their own consumption and for sale on the market.

Another very important change is the increase in the organisation of civil society in the municipalities benefiting from the programme. This is because in order to be included in the programme, the municipality must be organised with a “Citizen’s Forum for Public Policies” or a “Participatory Budget Forum”. The families and communities thus feel more responsible for their common future and less dependent on the traditional political powers of the big landowners who have used the water problem in the past to promote their own political ambitions.

There is an increasing level of participation of the women in the different aspects of the program, which opens space to them for more participation in the public life of their communities. Maria Joelmia da Silva Pereira, for example, is the first woman to participate in the fiscal council of the rural union of Pedra Branca, in the state of Pernambuco, and is well-known in her community as the “promoter” of the One Million Cisterns Programme: “For me, women can and must act in the public space”.

Valmir Bezerra, a construction foreman, has built several of the water tanks that have changed the life of the families in these communities. To build a cistern, it is not enough for one member of the family to be enthusiastic. The whole family must embrace the idea and be convinced that it will be the starting point for change – a change that will bring them well-being, health, and more free time to dedicate to education, subsistence and leisure.

For the participation of families in the programme, there are certain criteria to be met. Priority is given to families where a woman is the head of the household; there are children under 6 years of age, children and adolescents attending school, adults of 65 years or more, and individuals with special needs. Also taken into account is the distance from the houses to the existing sources of water; as well as the family’s participation in community organisations.

The aid given by Diaconia involves providing materials to the families who adopt the project. The family group digs the hole, builds the structure of the tank, and provides meals for the workers. The workers are local people who have been trained and are assigned by the organisation executing the project.

Margarida Lopez, 65, has played an active role in the project, which today permits her and her family to live with dignity and a vision for the future.

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Our association intends to build 60 cisterns in the coming months – 14 are at present under way. Each family in the association will have its water tank. I have been hired to do the construction work. Every time I finish building a cistern, I am very happy because I know that each family I help can now be healthier and improve its life style.”

Valmir Bezerra - Construction foreman

Diaconia gave us the materials and my sons did the work themselves. So we were able to build the tanks and make them hermetically sealed; we have also learned how to do the maintenance so that we will always have clean water” - MARGARIDA LOPES - 65 years old

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I want to go to university and train to be a teacher, first to teach young children, and eventually high school adolescents. I want to come back and teach here: it is a small community and a good place to teach.

There is still a long way to go to meet the goal of one million cisterns. So far, some 162 thousand family tanks have been built in more than 1,000 municipalities, benefiting some 800 thousand individuals. But the fact that the Semi-Arid Coordination Group (ASA) has been able to mobilise different sectors of society – private enterprises, NGOs, international cooperation agencies, and the different levels of government – reflects the recognition of the enormous impact that this Programme is having in the life of the beneficiary communities.

The programme benefits the participating families largely by offering them a much healthier way of life and more free time to produce their own food, raise animals, and even plan to pass on to the marketing their own crops generating much needed income.

In the opinion of 15-year-old Ana Patricia do Nascimento, water is the key to everything. She likes living here despite the adversities; she knows what it is to drink polluted water with its inherent risks, and she is aware that her region has a high infant mortality rate as a consequence of the diarrhoea caused by the poor quality water that most of the population drink, because they have no other option. When she talks about the rainwater cisterns, Patricia’s face expresses her high hopes and enthusiasm. She is sure that the rainwater tank system has changed her life and that she can make plans for a better future.

Oxfam’s participation in the One Million Cisterns Programme is not limited to helping with the actual construction of the tanks. Omar Rocha, Coordinator of Oxfam’s Livelihoods Programme in Brazil, explains: “We also support a nationwide campaign to make the public aware of the activities of the Semi-Arid Coordination Network (ASA); a campaign to raise more funds for the Programme and the introduction of a participatory monitoring system for the Programme”.

For more information about the One Million Cisterns Programme, visit the ASA web site: www.asabrasil.org.br.
Oxfam GB is a development, relief, and campaigning organisation that work with others to find lasting solutions to poverty and suffering around the world.

Oxfam GB was founded in Oxford (England) in 1942 and has been carrying out programmes in South America for 40 years. At present, it has programmes in Brazil, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Peru, where the Regional Centre is also located.

Oxfam works at different levels (from local to global) carrying out development and humanitarian programmes, public campaigns and advocacy in more than 80 countries. The different lines of action are combined in such a way as to be mutually reinforcing and to produce the changes needed to overcome poverty in a permanent, sustainable way.

Oxfam GB is a member of Oxfam International, a confederation of 13 non-governmental organisations working with 3,000 local organizations in more than 100 countries, to find lasting solutions to poverty, suffering, and injustice.

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