

From our water correspondent

Water, water everywhere – but quite unsafe to drink

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The rains came late again this year, and last night the heavens truly opened up, to everybody's relief. There had been panic all over the Kafanchan villages before they arrived. The stock of grains from last year was fast dwindling, and the early maturing beans (*achishuru*) that help families through the hunger months of May and June were late in arriving. The cost of maize had doubled from what it was this time last year.

At the BayanLoco village meeting two days ago, the men were gathered in the evening and discussing current affairs and world issues, but the topic that attracted the most interest was the late rains and their consequence for household food security. The wells were drying up and the households where they still have some water left in their wells are placing restrictions on who, when, and how many buckets of water you can draw from their well. That means women and children had to trek longer distances to find brooks and river beds that still had some water left in them.

A few days ago, Gawom Foundation, a Manchok-based NGO, started to distribute palm tree seedlings to women farmers. This was to serve the triple purpose: to replace trees that are being cut down for firewood, to generate income from the palms fruits and fronds and to restore the natural ecology of this region, which may help to attract more rain.

One of the mothers of this village has osteoporosis and finds it difficult to go to the farm or fetch water from the well. So she stocked up enough well water before the rains came to last her while it is unsafe for her to use her walking stick on the muddy and slippery footpaths of Zahuwo. I was with her last night and saw her pile of firewood and the large pots filled with water. She is glad that the rains are finally arriving here.

One area of water conservation that we have never considered seriously in

Bayanloco is rain water harvesting. We are now getting abundant rains, but most of it is running off in muddy gutters to the streams. Maybe we need to learn a trick or two from my physically disabled mother who stores up water in her pots for the hard days when she has no access to safer sources of water. I will discuss this with the village chief and also sound out the women. Safe storage and space considerations are issues that immediately come to mind. We will see.

The rains have arrived, and so have the mosquitoes, and of course malaria. More children are now staying off school because of fever, and valuable farm labour time is lost when the joint pains and headaches of malaria stop adults from attending to farm work.

The only borehole in the village has long gone out of use. I dream of when each household (of about 15 individuals) will have one tap of water within their compound, and the women and children can be spared this annual festival of drought. The droughts seem to

increase in duration with each passing year, and the distances people have to trek to fetch water get longer. In these circumstances, the quality of the water becomes secondary. A Canadian volunteer who visited BayanLoco told me something about placing water in the sun to purify it. We have plenty of sun here, the challenge will be how, where, when and in what receptacles to treat the water and store the purified product.

In the cities, entrepreneurs have trucks that sell water to households. People are too poor in BayanLoco to buy water (whoever heard of such a thing?), and the roads cannot support those trucks anyway. I travelled to Zonkwa on Saturday to watch a new borehole being drilled. I had a chat with the engineer about costs, etc, and the price he mentioned is clearly beyond the reach of our community. We must look for less high-tech and more affordable alternatives.

China feeds her billion population and has enough water for them, and a friend said the secret is simple: an integration of their food and waste management systems ensures optimal use of all resources. It has been successfully applied also in Vietnam, South Africa is doing a pilot, and so is Brazil. Why not us here in Bayanloco? What would it cost? Can we afford to bring even one of the experts to come and show us the rudiments of setting up a digester? The possibilities of job creation through waste management, enhanced food security, year round availability of safe domestic water are some of the beacons of this technology. It would make my day to be able to conclude my water correspondence in a few months with a report of what we may have started on this ambitious project.

Time to retire for the day, the clouds are gathering again, and there will be a downpour before long. The guinea corn harvest this year should be good, with all this rain.

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Before the rains come, women have to walk further to find water. Credit: R. Nyberg/USAID