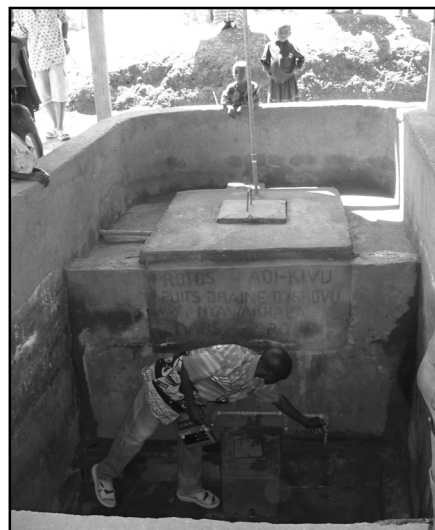


From our water correspondent

Travel from Kigali to Bukavu, DRC, entails a dizzy corkscrew journey through the mountainous Nyungwe rainforest in Rwanda. En route we pass the sign to the new path to, reportedly, 'The source of the Nile'. Due to be opened in 2007, work is underway to cut a path through the dense forest. Around one sharp corner, we are greeted by about 40, startled, brown eyes of Colobus monkeys who forage along this route. They quickly scamper up the embankment, staring curiously back at us as we pass. After a couple of hours, we pop out of the forest (before my stomach lands in my lap) into the vibrant green plains of the Gisenyi tea estates. Pickers, paid 7 US cents per kilo, clad in green plastic aprons and battered hats, dot the horizon. They sing as they pick.

At 11 a.m. I cross the rickety border at Cyangugu on foot into Bukavu and DRC. As I walk up the hill, I am approached by a woman wearing a bobbed, red wig who ushers me into a metal shed, and demands my yellow fever card. In the panic of packing it's been forgotten, and so I begin to negotiate how much I must pay to be let out of the now very hot, metal shed. I barter her down from US\$30 to 15, but, getting no receipt for my payment, I leave, feeling rather disgruntled that I have been bamboozled before even getting into DRC! Further up the hill, at Immigration, 'jiggy jiggy' music is



Access to the *puit drainage* tank is below ground level.

blasting out of a tiny portable radio, with enough distortion to make your eardrums rattle. Women with loads of bread rolls 1m high balanced on their heads brush past me, and steely-eyed officials glare and snap at the jostling crowd.

Luckily, I am rescued by Venant, President of PEHA (Platform Eau, Hygiene and Assainissement). This group of six local, watsan NGOs was set up with funds from PROTOS in 2000, to co-ordinate, harmonize and complement each other's work and improve the quality of watsan activities in South Kivu.

We leave Bukavu, heading out along the shore of Lake Kivu through marshlands and past columns of women carrying huge piles of wood and charcoal. They carry their baggage slung between the back and forehead using a sarong. It looks as though a diminishing forest is walking to market. Not a man is in sight, apart from in bars or passing cars. The road is bad, bumpy and dusty, my hair is beginning to resemble that red wig, and we've only been going 40 minutes!

We stop at what seems like a random spot on the side of the road, and meet a group of smartly dressed men, who turn out to be the local leaders. Together we weave our way through a banana plantation to the lake shore. Here a boat is waiting with six oarsmen, clutching paddles made from a plank of wood and a piece of jerry can. As we cross the lake, they whistle and sing for a safe crossing. As we approach the shore of the Ishovu Island at least 40 women are singing, clapping and shaking their hips. They greet each boater with cries of happiness and hugs. By the time we walk to the '*puit drainage*' only 50m from the shore, at least 200 people have appeared, all jostling for a good position.

The *puit drainage* was designed by ADI KIVU, (one of the members of the platform) in response to endemic cholera and bilharzia, and the reluctance by locals to install a hand pump, which they feared was too expensive and technically difficult to maintain. The *puit drainage* is a cross between a water tank and a well, so the tank is situated below the water table, and around the

tank, you have the usual gravel pack used in well design. To collect water you climb down 2m of steps, and open taps at the base of the tank. The tank has a pipe for aeration, a service hatch, and at ground level, a drain for waste water, which is scooped out using half a jerry can. Each household contributes 50 Congolese francs every three months, (about 10 US cents). Of these, only about 50 per cent have the means to contribute, which they do, in sorghum or manioc. Despite their poverty, they have raised enough to fix five broken taps this year. As the nearest hardware shop is in Bukavu, 40km away, from breakage to repair takes about a week (as, having no transport of their own, they must wait till market day for transport). Normally, the attendants open and close the taps for the public.

I am dubious about the workload of the women, having to climb up the steps with their full jerry cans, and then back up the hill to their homes. But they are clearly overjoyed that the cholera has stopped and the *puit drainage* is used and well maintained. Hygiene, however, remains poor. The protruding stomachs of the little children indicate worms and they report some cases of diarrhoea. With a PHAST programme due to start soon, this should alleviate some of this sickness.

South Kivu struggles along with insecurity; most households and businesses complain of being robbed of their few belongings by looters and of recurring malaria; and the women complain of back problems from carrying heavy loads. Yet, they party, and laugh, and dance, and sing, and welcome strangers with overwhelming hospitality. They have clean water; they have life.

If you would like to know more about the water platform or the *puit drainage*, you can contact ADI KIVU adikivu@yahoo.fr

If you would like to view a short clip of the *puit drainage* you can see it on the PROTOS website www.protosh2o.org

Hester Kapur is Regional Co-ordinator, Rwanda, Burundi and DRC, for PROTOS (a Belgian NGO promoting water management and sanitation).