

## From our water correspondent

Here, in the heart of Rwanda, we can see at least 1000 hills and beyond to the volcanoes of Goma, 60km away. It's the beginning of the short rainy season and, after the evening downpour, the mornings are crystal clear. We are late, like every WATSAN team I've known, who do a day's admin before leaving for the field. Engineers fly around the office, clearing stock, getting mission orders signed, filling petrol tanks and delegating orders. In the car, Ellie, the driver, is listening to bad Rwandan choral music. This keeps playing on a continuous loop for the next three days.

After leaving, we bump through the alpine forest, spotting a local bee-keeper on the way, who has just collected fresh forest honey. We ask him for a bite, which we suck directly off the comb. It's like honey chewing gum – but not like the sickly honey we get at home, this is fragrant and woody and so sweet it makes my teeth tingle.

Today is the start of a three-day evaluation of the 'Regie Communal' trained and set up in 2002 to manage the water systems constructed by COFORWA (our partner NGO). Their role is to collect tariffs of 40 US cents per family per year, and use this money to repair breakages. The supervision of the Regie was handed over to the authorities in 2002, and, naively, COFORWA have not been back since. They assume everything is functioning fine. This evaluation, instigated by PROTOS, will look at what, if anything, exists and what lessons can be learned.

We find that the Regie office is made up of three people, President, Vice and Treasurer, located in the sector office. The two men are old, one has the early signs of cataracts, the other stares vacantly into space in reply to our questions. The woman is the largest lady I have ever seen in Rwanda.

After an introduction and general chit-chat, we start what turns out to be a very confusing if comical evaluation, as we try to understand the extent to which the Regie still functions, and its relations if any with the authorities and communities. The evaluation begins in their office, looking through receipts

and expenses. They still have a little money in the bank, US\$5, and this year in June the secondary school paid their tariff so the Regie were able to pay the district technician to carry out some repairs. On the whole, though, most of the receipt books are unused and the stock cards empty. They have little information on the status of the water systems, (other than that most have a low discharge) and no information on the names of the water committees or users.

With the Regie, and a representative from the local authorities, we visit water-points, springs, reservoirs, committees, churches, schools, the communities and the local authorities. It is an interesting tour into the interior, where stick men and women, clothed in earth-coloured rags, struggle to grow something in the dust. During our visits, we find users are collecting between 6 and 11 l/capita/day. This is very low, but surprisingly fits into the national average of 8 l/capita/day. A man describes taking a bath with a cup of water; handwashing must be almost non-existent. The discharge at the taps is also low, around 0.01–0.04 l/s. The community complains that it is always low in the dry season, and is even lower this year, because of last year's drought. In the three days, we only find one water management committee; they at least managed to collect some money to repair a broken tap earlier this year. Other communities report that the committee is there, but they don't collect money. Few people have heard of the Regie. In two communities the tap has totally broken. Internal disputes over different quantities of water used, plus the high price to replace the Teflon taps, have left this issue unresolved. In another two communities we find that they have managed to raise the money to repair the broken taps and the water point is functioning.

We find out that the hierarchical structure of this society has made it difficult for the Regie to approach the authorities for support, and bureaucracy makes the process slow. As a result they have not been working together. The district is supposed to

manage and oversee the work of the Regie Communal, so that if repairs are not done, then the district is meant to check with the Regie Communal why not. There are allegations that the district has been using the Regie's motorcycle and their stock (donated by UNICEF), which has also hampered their work. There is also much confusion as, following decentralization in 2005, 90 per cent of staff are new, young graduates, with little experience, support and no transport.

Finally we arrange a meeting with the Executive Secretary at 9a.m. the next morning. Until 11a.m., he is busy with the monthly free civil wedding services. This new initiative will empower women, giving them the right to land and property on the death of their husband. And so, beautiful women, dressed in traditional clothes (much like the Indian sari), queue up, with their husbands-to-be, clad in over-sized jackets and borrowed ties.

The Executive Secretary agreed to hand over the stock of spare parts to the Regie Communal, and to help them in encouraging the population to pay a contribution for the water.

Our evaluation was initiated in order to help COFORWA in their future work with the Regie Communal. In fact the outcomes are beyond our initial objectives. Firstly we have been able to regenerate the relationship between the Regie and the local authorities and in some ways assist their negotiations. Secondly we have re-motivated the Regie; they now know that we are there to listen and support them; and thirdly we have realized our mistakes and gained some learning into how we can better support our partners in East Africa. All this has only really been possible because of our five-year funding programme.

While change is slow, we build on what we know with our partners, and hope it will last.

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