

## From our water correspondent

We cross the border into DRC on foot, climbing up the hill, while our bags are pushed in a battered wheelbarrow with a flat tyre. A Belgian official has arrived at the same time, and the resident brass band of Bukavu is out in full tuneless force, shiny boots you can see your face in, and an assortment of crumpled brass instruments that have lost their shape and their shine. We slip through immigration, tagging behind the official, and hail a grubby cab with a smashed front window. My co-travellers, Bert and Norbert, raise their eyebrows in bewilderment 'Is this vehicle really going to get us to town?' As the alternatives are not much better, we pile in, and after 20 minutes of trying to roll start the car, backwards, and causing a huge traffic jam of irate beeping drivers, we pile back out and reload into something sleeker. Two kilometres down the road and the first cab passes us, beeping in excitement. When we get to the hotel, only one room is left, netless and without ventilation. Due to 'peace', all hotels are full, taken up by the NGO circus and government officials running capacity-building workshops on HIV/AIDS, good governance, peace building and so on.

After ten minutes we arrive at the PEHA symposium, late. PEHA, Plate-forme Eau, Hygiene et Assainissement (Water, Hygiene and Sanitation Plat-

form) is a group of seven local NGOs, funded by PROTOS since 2002. Their function is to co-ordinate, harmonize their approach, and develop guidelines on good practices (in the absence of a functioning water authority). They have invited PROTOS's other partners, ODAG and CISV from Burundi, COFORWA from Rwanda, REHA from Goma, as well as other local NGOs working in the region, plus potential new partners for the platform. In addition, government bodies such as the Head of Water and Regie Communal are also present. This meeting represents the official launch of PEHA – a debutante's ball – as well as providing a think tank about how PEHA will evolve and what are the WATSAN needs in South Kivu. Ingrid from BTC, new in town, is on the podium, giving an introductory speech. We put down our bags, gather our thoughts and address the governor and NGOs, 'It is a rare and historic occasion to see people from five countries in one room, but it is also exceptional because we work in a complicated and unstable region....'

Here, in this meeting we have engineers from DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Belgium, exchanging ideas, good practices and recommendations on issues like protecting the environment, strengthening the management of the water sources and systems, and

hygiene promotion. The hottest topic is the Regie Communal and public/private management, which puzzles and challenges all of us. In the last five years the partners have built systems and handed them over to trained committees and seen the management, the money and eventually the infrastructure wane.

Often the reason is that nearing the end of funding for a programme, the management of the Regie Communal is handed over by the NGO to the government (districts), who lack time and resources to manage them properly. Godefroid, Laurent and Nestor present the Regie Communal system from Burundi. The theory of this system is good, but due to the post-conflict poverty, only about 30 per cent of the population can afford to contribute to recurring repair costs. As a result there is little money in the bank to make the repairs and buy a new motorcycle to monitor the work of the waterpoint committees. Norbert presents the Regie Communal system of Rwanda. In Rwanda, on average, 60 per cent of the population can afford to contribute, so repairs are possible and they can also pay themselves a small monthly salary. He also presents the public/private system which is currently being introduced by the Government of Rwanda for all new water systems. The management of these systems is tendered to private contractors. The reaction of the Burundians is uproar. They fear that in a private system, if someone cannot afford to pay, they will not get water. In contrast, the Regie Communal system, being community based, allows free water for the very poor.

The Congolese are particularly interested in these discussions, as in South Kivu no management system is in place. The debate runs long and heated with 40 opinionated people in the room; there are many views, comments and frustrations.

Over the last five years we have also seen the amount of water in the taps diminish to a trickle, due to climate changes and poor protection of the water catchment areas. A professor from the University of Bukavu speaks on the



The symposium for the first time brought together engineers from DRC, Burundi, Rwanda and Belgium, discussing how best to manage the water systems