

## From our water correspondent

*In the last of her reports, Hester Kapur looks back on her time in Central Africa, and compares her good and bad experiences of Rwanda, DRC and Burundi.*

At the terminal for the new Eurostar, Brussels to London, I hurry to the loos before boarding the train. A very apologetic Eurostar official says they closed because they don't have any water. From East Africa to Western Europe in one easy leap, same problems ... different continent.

As the train slips out of the city through the jungle of glittering skyscrapers and fading graffiti, I think back over what I have left.

Living in Rwanda has been like having a noose, very slowly, tightened around my neck, until the last breath is only, a tiny, gasp. The heavy government controls and complicated administration systems had me running in circles for another paper, another stamp, another notified copy. Officials have laughed in my face when I showed I was weak by complaining or losing my patience.

It seemed there was, at times, a reluctance to our presence and, unable to state it openly, they instead made it hard to get work permits and travel freely to neighbouring countries. It is a silent resistance to outsiders.

As a coping mechanism, I have often thought that the population are heavily dosed on Valium. Their empty eyes, no thoughts, no action, no music, no energy, no colour. These are the eyes of caged lions. Their initiatives, ideas and innovations silenced by the government.

Hidden away on some remote hills in Nyakabanda are COFORWA (Compagnons Fontainiers Rwandais), PROTOS's local NGO partner. Here, out of direct sight, the project has moved forward. Government legislation means that, in terms of financial reporting, they are accurate, reliable and timely. Since 1972 they have laid over 1,000 km of pipeline and constructed over 3,000 water points; these funded by PROTOS, the church, UNICEF and district authorities.

In the last 2 years they have started a Child to Child hygiene programme in 24 schools. Almost all of the children now wear shoes, hand-washing is available outside classrooms and toilets, the classrooms are clean and tidy and in their communities they continue to make dramas, much to the amusement of the public. These dramas give the kids confidence and respect and provide a little light entertainment in an otherwise routine day.

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Working in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) for over two years, was like flying. Teaming with life, 7 to 11 kids in a family, every female with a child strapped to her back. Breeding, breeding, breeding. Each third vehicle an NGO or the UN. Raining money. Workshop, after meeting, after training, after workshop. Fresh-faced whites, excited to have made a career jump, sign up for this cowboy hellhole in their hundreds. Congolese join in, adapt to playing the donor game. Locals smile playfully with their eyes, greeting me, asking me how I am, and shaking my hands. Here there is hustle and bustle and music, and dance and laughter and energy. Everyone out for a fast buck, a dollar in their pocket, from here and from there.

Here PROTOS has worked with PEHA, a platform of seven collaborating watsan NGOs. They have developed guidelines on minimum standards for technical work such as spring protections or VIP (ventilated improved pit) latrine construction; pioneered new technologies such as the 'Puit drainage' on the endemic cholera islands in Lake Kivu; initiated an integrated water resource management project by setting up a tree nursery and then planting and protecting some of the catchment area to prevent the springs drying up; produced latrine sanplats for sale and promoted them in the pilot communities.

Given the difficult, and sometimes unstable climate in which they work, they have proved to be resilient problem solvers.

Visiting Burundi for over two years has been like dying. Every hand was outstretched, begging for money, skin hung off the bones, everybody dressed in ripped, earth-stained rags, every eye yearning for help. The beggar boys now have it down to a fine art and would beat Brad Pitt hands down in an acting competition. Each morning they fight for a prime spot outside the restaurants and hand round bags of glue to sniff, to pass the time.

Despite this grinding poverty, our partner ODAG's (Organization de Développement de l'Archidiocèse de Gitega) work is the most positive in terms of changes for PROTOS. On a few hills in Burundi, people are building latrines and drying racks and showers out of a few sticks and dried grass. They are sweeping their yards and conserving their drinking water. They are paying for the management of the water system and, with the money, one or two of the Regie Communaux have independently protected new springs and made repairs to tap stands and pipes. Out in the field, away from the ministers' successful attempts to steal the pot, ODAG has turned the programme around.

The pilot hygiene project which started in March proved successful. Not all sites worked well and the opportunity of

visiting a failing community taught us more. Here we found a 'Big Man' hygiene promoter who had four community jobs and so was not doing any. The result, an unfair selection process for the donation sanplats, dirty houses and yards, smelly people. On my final visit we agree closer follow-up needs to be done with a system put in place to sign off for beneficiary households. We also decide that they need to improve their selection of the community workers.

My last weeks in Africa are spent with my replacement, Harald: a veteran to development and Africa, who comes with reinforcements, a wife Sandra and three kids.

In turn we visit each of the partners, their people, projects, finances and communities. First off is COFORWA with a gender mainstreaming training project. Harald jumps straight into a role play with me on sexual harassment. Next, to DRC where, after a meeting with the local administrator, who appears to have a stolen bath in his office, we visit some of the best VIP latrines we

have ever seen. Finally to Burundi where conveniently lost keys mean we cannot visit the Regie Communal office.

In each case we fit his skills and experiences to their needs: COFORWA improving measurable indicators; PEHA redirecting their sanitation project; ODAG and CISV carrying out an in-depth evaluation of the Regie Communals.

It has been a baptism of fire for poor Harald. Delays at the borders, confusion over paperwork, luggage stuck in customs, Bernard's dodgy driving, bits of car falling off, Congolese officials demanding money, officious Rwandese, Burundians not sure what they are doing, computer breakdowns and grindingly slow internet connections. It has been, how it is ... A month in the life of ...

The train glides into St Pancras, dazzling, clean and new. The air is crisp, the winter sun low and casting golden shadows. Passport control smile and look me in the eye and wave me through.

It's bliss to be back.

