

“Real Lives: Angola, Africa”

Growing up in the Angolan village of Mabuia, one hour north of the capital, Luanda, Fatima had to spend up to four hours each day collecting water from the river. It was a dangerous trek. One year, seven of Fatima’s friends were attacked by crocodiles.

But the girls carried a much bigger danger back with them to the village. The water was polluted and spread disease. As a result, when Fatima herself was not sick, she had to spend many hours each week caring for sick brothers and sisters, and when she grew older, for her own sick children.

In 2000 the Angolan Government and UNICEF teamed up to lay a pipeline from the river to the community at Mabuia. Latrines, washbasins, taps and showers were then built, together with a filtering system to ensure every drop of water was drinkable. As a result, diarrhea rates dropped almost to zero, child deaths plummeted, and many girls (who no longer had to spend hours every day carrying water) entered school for the first time. A community water and sanitation committee now maintains the system and teaches hygiene to the rest of the community.

A neighbor of Fatima’s, 13-year-old Celina, is one of those who has started going to school because of the pipeline. Previously, Celina’s life had been dominated by collecting water. She had to walk to the river and back three times a day. Now she can do her chores in a fraction of the time. And her younger brothers and sisters are healthy, so she does not have to care for them.

Unfortunately, Mabuia remains the exception rather than the rule in Angola. Almost three decades of war have left millions of people without clean water or basic sanitation. A huge task remains: drilling boreholes across the country, constructing major pipelines, establishing a national sanitation education campaign, and providing water to schools.

Fatima may be one of the lucky ones, but the facilities she, her children and Celina now have are not a luxury, but a necessity and a right. “A mother must take care of her children,” Fatima says, “but we cannot do that when we have only dirty water.”

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