

Ten Thirsty Children TOGO



Seven year-old Bilao from the village of Agbelouve in Southern Togo came to the Togolese capital, Lomé, on Earth Day 2003 to speak about how the lack of safe drinking water in her village affects her everyday life.

"I am Bilao Tchaa, I was born on 15th June, 1995, in Adjengré. I am in class CE1 at the Ecole Primaire Publique in Anié Ville. My village has 500 inhabitants. There are a lot of children. My village is surrounded by big mountains, but there are no trees. I rarely see any birds. I'm happy to speak out about the water situation in my village. You know, I've repeated my second year just because I get to school late every day. Do you know why? There are no [water] pumps in my village. Every morning I have to walk three kilometers to fetch water from a river near my house. The water that I get is very red but we have nothing else, so we drink it with joy. Every evening, when I get back from school, I make the same journey. The thing I don't like is that my mom wakes me every morning at five o'clock when I want to stay asleep. So I always fall asleep in class. I'm ashamed but my friends call me tsetse fly [the tsetse fly spreads sleeping sickness]. I can barely understand what the teacher says. I am good at writing but I don't like mathematics because I'm never there when the teacher shows us how to do the calculations."

"My mother is very brave because she goes to fetch water three times every day. Then, she goes to the market to sell vegetables. Unfortunately, she often arrives at the market late, which means that she can't sell very much. It doesn't rain a lot and my father's field doesn't give as much millet as it used to. I have a little garden, but mom won't let me water it, and so my little plants have all died because they were thirsty. What's more, several of my friends often get ill, and the nurse says it's because of the water. We were told there are groups in Lomé who meet every day to talk about our problems, but since then they still haven't come to give us water. And we are the thirsty ones! As it is Earth Day, I beg the people who are always talking about us on the radio to come to our village and at least dig us a well. Ladies and gentlemen, we need a pump or a well. If you refuse, when I grow up, I will tell my children to tell you these things again. I am waiting!"



Togo's Water Statistics at a Glance

(According to the Pacific Institute)

- Togo has 14.7 km³/year of renewable freshwater.
- 51 percent of the water is safe to drink.
- 34 percent of Togo's population has access to sanitation.

In Togo, none of what Bilao describes is unusual. Only 65% of Togolese enjoy access to safe drinking water; less than one quarter of the total population has any access to any form of sanitation. Most of the rural population is extremely poor, and almost 75% of the population survives on less than 60 cents per day. Even in the villages where the government has installed water pumps, many people are too poor to pay the user fees and have no choice but to draw water from heavily contaminated rivers and lakes. Water-borne diseases are rife in these areas and contribute to a high rate of infant mortality; almost 15% of Togo's children die before the age of five. Almost one third of Togolese children suffer from diarrhea. The Togo Ministry of Health has found that diseases spread by contaminated water have a damaging effect on children's education. These diseases can lead to lack of concentration in classes, absence from school, failed exams, and abandonment of studies, especially when expenditure on medicines leaves parents unable to pay for school fees and materials. Bilao's experience demonstrates how water scarcity affects the position of Togolese women. In Africa, fetching water is generally the work of women and children; however, these populations suffer disproportionately from the lack of adequate supplies. On average, African women travel six kilometers every day to supply their families with water. Millions of African women and children, like Bilao and her mother, must walk a lot further.

Ironically however, Togo possesses potentially vast water resources. Most of Togo receives well over a meter of rain each year, and Togo has surface and ground water to satisfy all domestic, industrial, and agricultural needs several times over. However, Togolese lack the facilities and funding to exploit this potential. For example, a program of well and latrine building accompanied with education in basic hygiene would do a lot to help children like Bilao. \$300 would be ample to dig a well which would supply Bilao's entire village with safe drinking water. NGOs in Togo plan to engage local authorities and volunteers to dig wells and provide hygiene education in Togo's thirstiest villages. The organizations hope that such projects will serve as preludes to larger well building programs and will provide valuable experience for future projects. The difficulties with the project stem from the remoteness of many of the villages concerned. NGOs based in the capital hope to forge partnerships with local NGOs in the remote parts of Togo. Another potential difficulty involves persuading Togolese to abandon unhygienic and unsanitary behaviors that are either more convenient than sanitary behaviors or have traditional roots. The program will establish a strong link between the benefits of water supply and hygiene, and will serve as a valuable tool for forging new partnerships and raising consciousness at a national level.