After the Fire

A military rebellion in 2002 divided one of West Africa’s most stable countries and displaced up to 750,000 people. Now, amid political uncertainty, efforts are under way to restore damaged water sources and introduce sanitation to save lives.

At a checkpoint on the road leading to Niéméné, three armed men in uniform are more interested in nursing their rebel looks than in staring down their gun sights. Eight years after Côte d’Ivoire split in two, with Bouaké as the command centre of the rebel-held north, life is haltingly returning to normal.

Water engineer Yao Marcellin Loukou, driving a European Union-branded truck in a convoy of white UNICEF vehicles, is waved through by the former rebels of the Forces Nouvelles. For Loukou, raising money to put fuel in his official car is an everyday challenge. “Most of the time we are just stuck in the office,” says the engineer who is one of three staff at the Bouaké branch of ONEP – the Office National d’Eau Potable (National Drinking Water Agency). “Before the war there were 30 of us at ONEP but many left and some unfortunately died. The offices were destroyed and only reopened recently thanks to a European Union (EU) grant. But most water projects are funded by donors and they generally feel the political situation is still too unstable. Yet the needs are huge. In this area alone, at least 600 new pumps are required.”
Former rebels of the Forces Nouvelles man a roadblock marking the entrance to a buffer zone dividing northern and southern Côte d'Ivoire. The political crisis that began in 2002 has led to neglect of infrastructure. In Niéméné (centre) a woman draws water from a well whose defective pump has been removed by villagers.

“We have waited so long for water that we are really determined to make the system work. You can be sure that everyone will contribute to the water committee”

Niéméné water committee member Ya Karidioula

Côte d’Ivoire used to be the envy of West Africa. The proceeds of cocoa production filled government coffers and civil servants delivered services, including a functioning safety net for the poor. With World Bank support over decades, boreholes had been sunk on a vast scale. Fifteen years ago, it was a matter of pride that no more than 30 per cent of pumps in rural areas were ever out of order at a given time.

But in the mid-1990s, politicians began manipulating the concept of “Ivoirité” (Ivorianness) by turning southerners against northerners. After a first coup d’état in 1999, then disputed elections the following year, President Laurent Gbagbo came to power. During an attempted coup in 2002, rebel soldiers failed to seize Abidjan but were successful in taking control of Bouaké and Korhogo, effectively splitting the country in two. The situation degenerated into civil war and the fighting left 3,000 dead and up to 750,000 displaced. Now, thanks to 8,500 UN peacekeepers and a political cohabitation agreement that has elevated Forces Nouvelles leader Guillaume Soro to prime minister, a semblance of national cohesiveness exists. But elections keep being delayed, leaving everyone – from government ministries and foreign donors to local business people, civil servants, doctors, nurses and teachers – unsure of what is coming next.

At Souroukoudougou women walk to a hand-dug pit to collect water because their pump – now overgrown – was damaged beyond use during the fighting.

SPOTLIGHT ON TWO PROJECTS

Two of the EU-UNICEF projects began in March 2008. Worth 5.5 million euros, of which 4.7 million euros was provided by the EU, they cover more than 200 villages in seven départements – Bouaké, Béoumi, Dabakala, Mankono, Zuénoula, Katiola and Sakassou. The areas covered are largely rural and have seen vast population movements in the past eight years – ranging from people fleeing to the south of the country to an influx of people escaping violence in Bouaké and other urban centres. The displacements during the worst of the crisis led to village water committees falling apart and to broken pumps not being fixed. Villagers returned to collecting water from unsafe sources, such as rivers. Sanitation efforts were abandoned.

TWO PROJECTS, THOUSANDS OF LIVES CHANGED

Around 300,000 people have benefitted from the two projects which have seen 290 pumps and piped water networks repaired and 120 new boreholes drilled. More than 2,000 households have dug latrine pits, 40 pump repairers and 420 bricklayers have been trained. Within the two projects, the target is to provide access to improved water to 85 per cent of the population and use of latrines to 75 per cent of people living in the catchment areas.
But on this day, something concrete is about to happen for the 3,000 people of Niéméné. Loukou is accompanied not only by UNICEF but by local politicians, partner NGOs and contractors. They bear blueprints that it takes two men to unfold, and tape measures reeled into large metal casings. This outpost of the département of Dabakala, 60 kilometres from Bouaké, is getting a “système d’hydrolique villageoise amélioré” (enhanced village water network), with pipes and taps linked to a bore-hole.

Villagers have gathered in the covered market place. Some, like water committee members Ya Karidioula and N’né Fofana, have dressed up. Sheets of A4 paper are handed round – a village map showing the primary school, the mosque, the dispensary and the market, as well as 45 numbered circles indicating taps. Today marks the start of the first visible work – the digging of pipe trenches and the marking out of the taps – since engineers in October 2009 found a reliable water source and sank a 102-metre-deep borehole. It had taken them 18 months and three previous attempts – each costing three million CFA francs (4,600 euros) – to strike lucky.

“We have waited so long for water that we are really determined to make the system work. You can be sure that everyone will make regular financial contributions to the water committee,” said Karidioula, a hospital orderly from Bouaké who fled back to her native Niéméné in 2004. “The fighting was so frightening that many of us left our jobs and returned to our villages.”

Fofana, who has lived in Niéméné all her life, says her daily routine will change forever when she has a tap at home. “Life,” she says, “will be less tiring. You get up early, sweep the compound then head off to get water. We have about 50 traditional wells in the village but by 8am or 9am every day, they are dry. If you don’t get water early, you have to wait until after 1pm for the water level to have risen enough again to fill a bucket.

“We have a proper well, which is about 20 years old, but during the conflict it broke down. So the men removed the pump head and we have been using ropes and a bucket. But that well also dries up every...
In Adjoblessou, where the only water available is collected from a seep, a villager (left) drinks from a sachet he has bought. In Ouéréguékaha (right) a partnership between UNICEF, the European Union and the government has given the community access to piped water.

morning, and using a rope is unhygienic because you can’t help it touching the ground and that allows germs to get into the water,” said Fofana.

Karidioula added that villagers had felt immense frustration at waiting since March 2008 and enduring three failed drilling attempts. “We received information about hygiene and clean water and how to prevent our children from getting sick but we still had to wait until now for the clean water.”

Niéméné is one of five villages in Dabakala to benefit from a 3.5 million euro EU-funded post-conflict programme, facilitated by UNICEF through partner NGOs, civil servants like Loukou and local administration. The money is also being spent, across 123 other villages over three years, on drilling 84 wells, restarting village water committees and building 465 demonstration latrines – largely in schools – to inspire thousands of families to follow suit. The programme budget is spent on training a range of people – villagers, facilitators from NGOs, politicians, contractors and masons – as well as on buying materials. In parallel, in the départements of Dabakala, Mankono, Béoumi and Zuénoula, the EU is providing 70 per cent of funding for a two million euro programme of new pumps, refurbished traditional wells, a latrine-building drive and education about sanitation. There is overlap between the two efforts but at least 300,000 people – including at least

“The regional council is organising a tender process. Village water committees will select contractors to maintain pumps. We local politicians want to have a central role”

Regional Council vice president Onhué Ouattara

Through three water and sanitation partnerships between the EU, UNICEF and the Ministry of Infrastructure worth 6.2 million euros 1,200 villages have gained access to clean water and have built latrines.

Now, around 30 per cent of pumps are out of order at any one time.

In the two main partnerships between UNICEF and the EU, 200 villages and about 300,000 people are benefitting, including 50,000 children under the age of five.

In those villages:
• 290 pumps and water networks have been repaired.
• 120 new boreholes have been sunk.
• 420 bricklayers have been trained in latrine-building.
• More than 2,000 households have dug latrine pits.
• 40 pump repairers have been trained.

Targets:
• Improved water to 85 per cent of the population in the partnership area.
• Use of latrines to 75 per cent of people in the catchment area.
Water, Sanitation and Hygiene in Côte d’Ivoire

50,000 children under five – are set to benefit. The target, by January 2011, is for 85 per cent of people to have ready access to clean water and for three-quarters of them to be using latrines.

Loukou briefs the villagers on the work ahead. Later, he admits he has some worries. “I just hope the village water committee does its work and collects regular payments. In Côte d’Ivoire, people have become used to the State fixing broken pumps. Twenty years ago we tried to shift the onus to the villagers by introducing a payments system to provide the water committee with a budget to pay for pump spares and the services of a professional. The idea was good, but the profit margin on the spares was not sufficient to motivate hardware stores to stock them. So the repairmen could not get the parts, the system fell apart, and everyone went back to waiting for ONEP to come and fix their pumps.”

Local politician Onhué Ouattara, vice president of the regional council, enters the debate to reassure Loukou. “This time it will work,” says Ouattara. As an elected official with no resources to deliver on his own electoral promises, Ouattara welcomes the arrival of pumps and sanitation as progress of which he can reap partial political ownership. “The regional council will be the arbiter. Already, with UNICEF’s help, we are organizing the tender process which will see contractors selected by villages to maintain pumps. We as a

“In the context of the crisis, working with UNICEF makes sense because thanks to their international status they have access to areas where others will not go”

EU head of infrastructure in Côte d’Ivoire, Fabio Di Stefano
One of Côte d’Ivoire’s greatest handicaps is that the lack of new elections has given rise to a cankerous stalemate in public life. But despite ongoing challenges over delivery, UNICEF and the EU, unlike others, have never left the country.

“For us the priority will always be the welfare of women and children,” said UNICEF Côte d’Ivoire’s water, sanitation and hygiene manager, Fiorella Polo. “We already have five pilot projects in Côte d’Ivoire where, for four years, a system of maintenance contracts – rather like the ones you would have for office printers – has seen villagers and repairers live up to their obligations. There are challenges, some of them very human like simply convincing people that paying for their water should be a priority, and others of a more structural nature. But over the past few months, we have seen local politicians take a growing interest, and that is a good sign for the future.”

EU head of infrastructure in Côte d’Ivoire Fabio Di Stefano says that water and sanitation programmes worth 75 million euros between 2003 and 2009 provided 8.5 million urban and rural people in Côte d’Ivoire with reliable access to water. “In the context of the crisis, working with UNICEF makes sense because thanks to their international status they have access to areas where others will not go. We have already made great progress and are now approaching pre-crisis levels of accessibility to water in rural areas.”
Virginie Mahan, UNICEF Côte d’Ivoire water, sanitation and hygiene officer

“I ask the children to indicate places where others defecate in the open. This leads to a lot of giggling”

Virginie Mahan, UNICEF Côte d’Ivoire water, sanitation and hygiene officer
Water committee members and village elders meet government engineers to discuss where pipes and taps will be installed once the new borehole has been sunk. ONEP, the government water authority, estimates that one pump is required for 400 people. Villages of more than 2,500 people are deemed suitable for a piped water system.

“Some of the challenges are human, like simply convincing people that paying for water should be a priority. Others are of a more structural nature. But we have recently seen local politicians take a growing interest, and that is a good sign for the future”

UNICEF Côte d’Ivoire water, sanitation and hygiene manager, Fiorella Polo
OUÉRÉGUÉKAHA

Pegban and Apatcho Touré (above) have had a tap outside their house for seven years. “It makes life a lot easier,” says Pegban who has seven children with his wife Apatcho, “but you do tend to use more water when you have it to hand, so it becomes a little expensive.” The generator running the village pump broke down four years ago, leaving the Tourés and the 63 other households with taps with no option but to use a manual pump 500 metres away. This year, they got their water back after the system was repaired by CREPA, a regional water body working with funding from the EU. Farmer Yacouba Touré (pictured) maintains the generator and is tasked by the water committee with buying up to 300 litres of diesel each month. “I do the job voluntarily because the community has asked me to. But fetching fuel and looking after the generator takes me away from my field. It would be better if I could be paid a small salary,” he said.

“Having a tap makes life a lot easier but you do tend to use more water when you have one”

Pegban Touré, Ouéréguékaha villager
ASSAFOU

Villagers dig pits for latrines after Assafou, in Sakassou district, underwent “triggering” in May 2010, as part of moves towards it being declared “open-defecation-free”. Villagers (top right) use local materials, such as date palm trunks, to build the floors of their latrines. Retired civil servant Dominique Krakoffi (right) emerged as a “natural leader” during the “triggering” process and has been driving the fast-track process to move all households in Assafou to latrine use. “Within two months of ‘triggering’ we have dug pits for 23 latrines. Four of them are ready,” he said.

“Villagers must build their own latrines. If people just turn up and construct them without explaining what they are for, the latrines get used as storage spaces”

Guibril Kamssoko, UNICEF Côte d’Ivoire water, sanitation and hygiene officer