

SIERRA LEONE - The Water and Sanitation Project:

Before this project began, many communities in the Pujehun district of Sierra Leone lacked access to safe sources of water. Combined with poor hygiene practices, this meant that waterborne disease rates were high, putting the lives of many at risk.

The project, run by Christian Aid's partner RADA (the Rehabilitation and Development Agency) between February 2010 and April 2013, provided rural communities with clean sources of water.

A reliable supply of clean water has transformed these communities in so many ways. Over 17,500 people are benefitting, whether from the rain harvesting systems, wells or innovative water disinfecting technology which uses the sun's energy. But the reach of the project went further. Women and men now sell sachets of excess water on market days, bringing in additional income to their households as well as providing much-needed clean water to others. And because women and children no longer need to travel far to collect water, instances of snake bites, sexual exploitation and abuse have declined. Something as simple as clean water has made a huge difference to the quality of life in these communities.



Wells built by RADA have transformed communities across Pujehun. Credit: Christian Aid

RADA ensured the project's success by encouraging community members to take a leading role in developing sanitation. Village Development Committees were organised, bringing together members from the community to plan out how project can address their needs, for example planning the best places for wells and toilets to be built. These committees continue to identify the greatest need, and are now organised to bring these concerns to local government and NGOs and to call for support.

Before the project began, our partner discovered that women and girls spent up to 3 hours per day collecting water for their households, and the lack of good toilets affected them disproportionately. This gender imbalance is an injustice, and our partner focussed on redressing it. RADA made sure that the Village Development Committees comprised at least 50% women, a proportion which actually increased as the project continued. Women gained real influence and made decisions that benefitted them, whereas in the past their needs were overlooked. In almost all of the communities reached by the project, women were involved in choosing where wells should be built. They selected latrines that were safe, easy to use and protected their dignity, and 1752 were built, each with the needs of women and girls in mind.

The empowerment of women has been one of the best long-term effects of this project. RADA also helped them to devise water-fetching schedules with the agreement of their neighbours; the life of the whole community has been improved as a result, reducing conflicts, water wastage and improving hygiene. The project also trained communities about the HIV, health and gender issues that affected their development, changing harmful attitudes. One key

success was that residents in many villages now understand that women should be given opportunities, not only men, bringing gender equality closer.



Women participate in a Village Development Committee meeting in Pujehun. Credit: Christian Aid

Some of the villages that the project reached were worried that the knowledge and new behaviours that they gained would be lost once RADA left. To combat this, our partner ensured that the water treatment technology was simple to use, accessible to everyone in the community. RADA also trained volunteers in hygiene and sanitation, and these women and men continue to encourage their communities to adopt good practices. Thanks to these volunteers, many more people have been reached than would otherwise have been possible. Because members of the community are spreading the word about sanitation, the change that the project has wrought has been made lasting.

Another of Christian Aid's partners, NMJD (the Network Movement for Justice and Development), trained Village Development Committees to speak up for their needs. In the Kengo area of Pujehun, for example, people had to walk 10km to the nearest facility. Thanks to training from NMJD, the group won approval for a health facility to be built, which has been completed and will mean that communities have access to vaccinations and nurses, and that mothers and children get essential healthcare, reducing unnecessary deaths.

The project has delivered amazing results: waterborne disease rates have gone down by a fantastic 60%, and nearly two-thirds of the population now have access to safe water. Best of all, because communities are so engaged with the project, improvements will only continue over the years to come.