

Dancing on the head of a syringe

It's one of those bitter ironies, that progress can come on the wings of a Phoenix, that destiny can bring delight after despair. The story of destroyed water networks and murderous cholera in Haiti in 2010 could well be succeeded by a permanent improvement in its supply of safe water. The early steps are being taken now, 2011.

Even, or especially, in the darkest days of last December, 2010, when the cholera epidemic of Haiti was almost a pandemic, Denis Puthiot, a teacher, forced himself to adopt yet another routine. Like teachers the world over, always short of time and long in duties, he knows that routine, routine, routine, is half the answer to many problems – even the Creole language word for 'routine' is, no surprises, 'routine'.

What were Denis Puthiot's problems, in those days, and still today, as a key worker with the NGO SOS Enfants, in his Saint-Alphonse schools located in the marshy and cholera-prone shanty town of Cité Soleil in the capital Port-au-Prince? Let's not go too deep but, sure, they included pulling his schools and his students through the aftermath of one of Mother Nature's routine catastrophes on Haiti's charming, but little-charmed people and their stubborn souls: a savage earthquake, a pulverised infrastructure and the heights of unhygienic living conditions.

Clean water, clean schools

His solution was ... a solution, to be produced with much care and precise routines. A chlorine solution to be used to disinfect drinking and cooking water, and for cleaning working surfaces. For, after a time of using chlorine tablets to

purify the school's own supply of drinking water – and he was very enthusiastic about the new, stronger tablets from Medentech, the Irish producers of the tablets – he now injects 20 litres of water with a tiny dose of chlorine from a syringe. He had adopted the WATASOL approach, from the Antenna Technologies Foundation of Switzerland. This produces chlorine through the electrolysis of salt and water, in a masterfully simplified technique described at www.watasol.org.

In his year-end school vacations, he had tested the WATA devices and concluded he could – with at most two hours of daily electricity from his generator – produce 10 litres of chlorine in 5 days, enough for two schools. With this, they can provide their students with safe water, supply their canteen cooks and regularly clean all the floors in the school – classrooms, offices and kitchens – plus all latrines, seats and doorways.

He wants to expand these services, if he can build up more routines with another WATA device – towards servicing the local community, hopefully linked with health and hygiene education. He knows he must acquire more storage containers, so that he can run a system with routine delivery, routine stock rotation and a reserve supply. But with such containers about as rare in the city as a standing brick wall, he has to develop yet another routine – hunting, and keeping, containers.

Firemen light the flame of progress

These are the realities of 'scaling-up' essential water services in the community. They are being faced, on a larger scale, elsewhere in the city by the newly-arrived French GSCF emergency relief team. Fresh from a training session in their Paris HQ with WATASOL staff in December 2011, the team has been adding its considerable skills in logistics to ongoing efforts to upgrade safe water systems, however rudimentary to begin, in the capital city and beyond.

The six WATA devices they came with are not yet working to full capacity, the team reported in mid-February. They have quickly established a weekly

routine of three to four days of chlorine production, with planned daily output of 50 litres, and one to two days of distribution to selected communities. Yet, their hard work has not met their target, with a more typical daily output of 30 litres, with occasional peaks of 40 litres and, rarely, 50.

The reasons? Usually, it is the routine, post-disaster mix that the team reports: no salt available, not enough transport, not enough fuel for the generator. You can almost hear their Gallic wit, after a hard day, when they think back to their training session and the acclaimed WATASOL poster that challenges "What about WATASOL?". "O, wi, sètènman" (oh yeah, certainly!) they probably mutter in their new language, "but what about the salt, the transport and the fuel?".

It's all the more important, then, for these scarce resources to be used efficiently and to be made fully accessible. The installed capacity of WATA devices in Haiti soared by some 400% in 2010, due in no small measure to the opening of a maxi-WATA plant by the Main dans la Main Foundation, a repeat bulk purchase by Action Against Hunger, and the placement of 20 WATAs by SDC, the Swiss Agency for Cooperation and Development, with Haitian agencies.

In all, this capacity will soon pass the mark of adequate daily drinking water for one million people, before the stormy hurricane season arrives in June 2011. Before then, the GSCF, and SOS Enfants, and a dozen other WATA users will work in concert with the responsible Ministry and the WATASOL team, in April, to set up a new routine, of the long-term stability of production and distribution. Not a litre of safe water too soon.

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