



Success Story #3

Belgian Rotarians help build wells in Niger



A year ago, Belgian Rotarians from districts 1620 and 2170 started an ambitious project to improve the quality of life, or, in some cases, sustain life in Niger. This country ranks among the poorest in the world. Because the Rotarians want to provide clean drinking water to thousands in Niger, they're calling their project L'Eau, C'est la Vie, which in French means "Water is Life."

By building water pumps and granite-lined water wells during the next two years, Belgian Rotarians – with the assistance of UNICEF and the Niger government – intend to bring permanent sources of clean drinking water to 20 villages in the southern region of Tchintabaraden.

In November 2005, a delegation of Belgian Rotarians traveled to Niger to inspect potential sites for either new wells or for the refurbishing of old wells. True to the Rotarians' spirit of international cooperation, the Belgian team was guided and supported by the two existing clubs in District 9100 (Niger).

"On my trip I saw children suffering from horrible diseases contracted from drinking polluted water," says George Richard, of the Rotary Club of Bruxelles-Europe of Brabant, Belgium. He's the district's Rotary Foundation Chair, the national coordinator for the project and a Past District Governor. "I'll never be the same after what I saw in Niger" he says.

After teaming up with UNICEF, which has been active in Niger for over a decade, the Rotarians decided to rehabilitate ten wells and build ten new ones. They estimate the cost per well to be €16,600 (US\$20,000), and the total project to cost €330,000 (US \$400,000). Any remaining funds will be used to help train the villagers to maintain their new permanent water supplies.

Richard says that without the local support and presence of the Niger Rotarians, the project would not have got off the ground in Europe. "We wanted reassurance that our money was going to be invested securely, and we wanted an opportunity for long-term follow-up of our investments," says Richard.



Water & Sanitation

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The Rotarians are particularly interested in improving Niger's women's lives by eliminating their gruelling daily treks to potable water sources. "Beyond being caretakers, women are traditionally the educators of children," says Richard. "Instead of spending time teaching their children, they look for water."

The Rotarians' goal is to provide potable water for nearly 7,000 people. The project doesn't stop at the construction of modern water sources though. Once the wells are built, the Rotarians want to provide for regular, chemical quality control of the water by a Niger lab. They want to train community leaders in conservation and preservation techniques, and they'd like to launch a public-awareness campaign to promote hygiene. Many inhabitants now suffer from illnesses caused by sharing water with animals and by the contamination of washing laundry in their sources of drinking water.

Back in Belgium, members of the Rotary clubs of Ath and Lessines are helping local schoolchildren to single-handedly fund the construction of a new well in Niger. The Rotarians acted as executive producers for a CD entitled "Singing for Water," composed by a teacher and performed by nearly 200 students. The young performers hope to collect €20,000 (approx. \$24,000 US) for "their" well from CD sales. They've already raised €17,000 (US\$20,000).



Richard says, only half jokingly, that "Water is Life" will engage his passion and his services for life. "What we're supplying is only a fraction of the water sources the country needs," he says. "We need the money to build 5,000 wells, not just 20. This has got to be a long-term project."



In the language of the Tuareg people of Niger, "aman iman" means "water is life." Clean drinking water however is in scarce supply for many of this African nation's 11 million people.

Recent droughts have pushed millions of Niger's people, who depend on rainwater to sustain crops and livestock, to the brink of starvation. Two-thirds of Niger's surface is covered by the Sahel desert, which limits its people from migrating to more fertile land within their country.

(Note: all exchange rates shown are approximate.)