



BUILDING FURNITURE AND A BETTER LIFE

by Nancy Zeilig

Joseph Chitsulo builds furniture in the village of Kajawo. Using blue gum (known as eucalyptus in some parts of the world) and other local woods, he makes chairs, tables, beds, cupboards, and doors in the open-air workshop beside his home. With help from a water, sanitation, and hygiene education project funded by Water For People, he's also building a better life for his family.

Kajawo is one of a cluster of rural villages about 20 kilometers from the city of Blantyre, Malawi's main commercial center. Despite their proximity to the city, residents of these villages have traditionally collected water from unprotected shallow wells and, consequently, were plagued by water-related diseases from chronic diarrhea to cholera.

The Chitsulo family was no exception. Joseph, his wife Bennedetta, and their four daughters were frequently ill with diarrhea. The older girls, Nyamazawo (12) and Irene (9), missed many days of school, and Joseph often had to take

Opposite page: Joseph Chitsulo outside his open-air workshop in Kajawo, Malawi. Above: The tools of Joseph's trade.

them and their sisters, Kulienna (6) and Catherine (3), to the hospital for treatment. Even though his carpentry skills enabled him to earn more money than many of his neighbors, much of his income went to medical care and public transport to the hospital.

Although the government hospital provides free health care, getting treatment there often involves hours of waiting. Trading money for time, Joseph usually took his daughters to a private hospital so he could get back to his workshop as quickly as possible. His furniture is in demand because the community has only one other carpenter, but his family's health problems left him too little time for work.

Water For People Projects Improve Local Health

Over the past two years, however, things have changed for Joseph's family and their neighbors. After a study implicated lack of safe water, inadequate sanitation facilities, and poor hygiene as the causes of persistent cholera outbreaks in the area, Water For People and its local partner organization, Hygiene Village Project, launched a two-phase project to remedy these deficiencies in October 2005.

Water For People contributed US \$10,000—more than 90% of the project's funding. Although Hygiene Village Project supplied only a small amount of money, it assumed primary responsibility for project implementation.

The first phase of the project—the Ntenje Shallow Well Project—helped community members construct five shallow wells, one in Kajawo and one in each of four targeted neighboring villages. Each well serves 250 people. The second phase—the Ntenje Sanitation and Hygiene Promotion Project—facilitated the construction of household latrines in these five villages and trained community members to institute sound hygiene practices. When this phase of the project was initiated in October 2006, only 20% of households in these communities had latrines. Now, 60% have latrines, most with a hand-washing station just outside the door.



Latrine design follows the principles of ecological sanitation, involving the conversion and reuse of human waste—primarily for fertilizer. Two permanent, partially lined shallow pits are surrounded by a mud or brick superstructure, and a movable concrete slab with foot platforms and a squat hole is placed atop one of the pits. When that pit is full, the slab is moved to the second pit, and the first is covered with a layer of soil and left to turn into compost. By the time the second pit is full—typically about seven months—the contents of the first pit are ready for use. Then the slab goes back on the first pit, and the process is repeated indefinitely.

Household members add three handfuls of soil and one handful of ash to the latrine each time they use it. The soil and ash raise pH levels, accelerating pathogen destruction and facilitating the waste's decomposition. The soil-and-ash mixture also dries out the waste material, eliminating odors and keeping flies away from the latrine. By containing and sanitizing the waste before they recover and recycle it, community members prevent the spread of disease and replenish nutrients in the soil for their crops.

Hand-washing stations consist of two upright sticks supporting a horizontal pole and a tiny platform that holds a bar of soap. Suspended from the crossbar are a bucket

of water collected from the well and a smaller container with holes in the bottom. The sun warms the water in the bucket as the day progresses. After using the latrine, household members dip the perforated container into the bucket and wash their hands under the water that flows from the small container's holes.

Each village has a hygiene club composed of volunteers trained to make concrete slabs for the latrines. As of mid-September 2007, these volunteers had cast more than 500 slabs. Slabs for adult-size latrines cost 2,000 Kwacha (approximately US \$14). Each household contributes to construction of its latrine by donating quarry stones, sand, and unskilled labor and paying 150 Kwacha (approximately US \$1.07). Water For People's funds are used for training, supervision, cement, and hygiene promotion.

Training in health and hygiene is delivered at community-level "sensitivity" gatherings, and children attend assemblies on hygiene at the community's two primary schools. In addition, designated community members make house-to-house visits to promote sanitation.

As a result of safe, reliable water supplies, additional latrines, and community-wide hygiene training, no cases of cholera have occurred in these villages this year. The incidence of diarrhea has dropped dramatically and the quality of life has improved.

Facing page: Joseph Chitsulo's family latrine with its hand-washing station just outside the door. Below: The Chitsulo garden with crops fertilized with compost from their latrine.



THANK YOU WATER FOR PEOPLE

by Mr. John Penu Bangstone Mchenga,
Zing'ando Village, Malawi

I thank you Water For People, for giving us this great wealth of boreholes and shallow wells. We now have safe drinking water. This is the beginning of development because now we will have good health.

Thank you Water For People because now we will no longer suffer from diarrhea and other water-related diseases. Today this enemy of development has been defeated and squashed like an ant.

There used to be lots of problems, especially when God decided it was time to darken the skies and bring down rains. At this time, lots of diseases like dysentery and cholera would flourish.

Thank you again, Water For People. We used to spend a lot of time looking after sick relatives. Now we will have more time to do development activities to benefit our area, now that Mr. Diseases, soldier and grandson of Dr. and Princess Death, is gone.

Now even Traditional Authority leader Makhuwira knows that girls are happy and he asks them to use this chance and go to school. One day one could even become speaker of Parliament.

It is now our responsibility to look after this precious gift. If we do this, Water For People will be encouraged and continue to assist us.

Thank you Water For People! Thank you very much! May almighty God bless you because you have done a very commendable job. As you know, a friend in need is a friend indeed.

Thank you very much.

The Chitsulo Family Enjoys Health and Prosperity

Joseph's family, like the other members of this community, is reaping the benefits of these changes. With four healthy daughters, Joseph no longer has to spend large chunks of time and money on medical care. His business is thriving, he was recently able to paint his house, and in March he acquired a cell phone. Most of the furniture he makes is for custom orders, and because cell phone service in Malawi is wide-ranging, his phone makes it more convenient for customers to reach him. Now he can even afford better schooling for his girls, and they are seldom absent.

Joseph feels "extremely happy and relieved" about the improvements in his family's health and financial situation. With the extra money he has these days, he plans to expand his business and improve his workshop. He also wants to find an easier way to transport timber to his shop. Right now he has to hire a car for this purpose, but someday he hopes to own his own vehicle.



Left: The Chitsulo family hand-washing station. Right: The awards ceremony honoring model hygiene homes in Kajawo, Malawi.

Sustainability Is Key

In September 2007, Water For People and Hygiene Village Project held an awards ceremony to honor community members who are maintaining model hygiene homes. The 15 requirements for a model hygiene household include routine procedures such as:

- storing water for drinking and cooking in a covered vessel
- using the two-cup system (one for dipping water from the storage vessel and another for drinking)
- washing hands with soap after using the latrine or changing diapers and before cooking or feeding children

Joseph's wife, Bennedetta, was one of a dozen women who received top awards at the ceremony. Prizes were chosen to help empower award-winners to sustain their achievements: the large covered pail will be useful for storing drinking water; the plastic cup can be employed in the two-cup system; and the bar of soap is essential to good hand-washing habits. The celebration also reinforced the concept that good health depends on all three components of the Ntenje projects—a safe water supply, sustainable sanitation facilities, and effective hygiene. ■

Nancy M. Zeilig is a freelance writer and editor based in Denver. She has been a supporter of Water For People since it was founded in 1991. Nancy served for 19 years as editor of Journal of the American Water Works Association. Her 2007 trip to Malawi was her first Water For People country tour. It won't be her last.