Contributing to small-scale rural water and sanitation projects

La Paz, Bolivia: I have been working as a UN Volunteer in La Paz, Bolivia, since 2009. I work in the Water and Environmental Sanitation section of UNICEF as a UNV Water and Sanitation Officer.

Volunteerism and water and sanitation don’t seem to have a lot in common at first sight. However, those who are familiar with water and sanitation projects know that community participation and development and therefore a certain degree of volunteerism are key to sustainability.

For me it is a great experience to contribute to small-scale rural water and sanitation projects that have such an impact on daily life, especially for women and children.

I once visited a household in a small and isolated rural community, where a mother explained to me that, before the water system was built, she had to
wake up before sunrise every morning to get water and make sure her children could go to school with clean hands and a basic breakfast. Today, she can get water in a second by just opening the tap on her patio, which enables her to dedicate more time to weaving and other activities.

In another community, an event was organized with the participation of the whole community and the Mayor to declare the community open-defecation-free. After recognizing that the lack of basic sanitation and open-air defecation is a major cause of health problems among children, the community decided to construct pit latrines with their own means and materials. And now they are proud to show that they have managed to improve their living conditions by building their own toilets.

These examples illustrate that enthusiasm and motivation are very important to promote development and to have a sustainable impact. At the government level, these elements and a necessary degree of volunteerism are also essential to generate public policies that guarantee children’s rights and, in this particular case, the right to clean water and sanitation.

For me, as a UN Volunteer with UNICEF, it is an everyday responsibility and a challenge to pass these values on both at the local level and within the ministries that set national public policies within the water and sanitation sector. At the same time, it is a very satisfying experience to be part of a process of change and to work for an organization like UNICEF, with a mission of such importance today.

By Koenraad Vancraeynest, UNV Water and Sanitation Officer with UNICEF Bolivia

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