

My Experience Building a Water System in a Small Rural Community in the Dominican Republic

Rosemary Wright.¹ 

The Experience

Clean water is vital for physical, social, and mental health. However, water insecurity is a public health threat for many countries. Water insecurity is defined as the inability to access adequate, reliable, and safe water needed for a healthy life.¹ Studies have shown that lack of clean water is associated with food insecurity, diarrheal disease, heightened blood pressure, poor mental health, and poor perceived health.²⁻⁶ It is therefore essential to improve water-related intervention efforts.

Sabana Larga is a rural community of approximately 230 families located in the province of Dajabon on the Northwest region of the Dominican Republic. The community relies heavily on rivers and streams for domestic water use including bathing, washing, cleaning, and cooking. However, these sources are unreliable because of the irregularity and insufficiency of rainwater. All families in the community worry about the water conditions. Building a new water system has been a priority for the community for many years but has been delayed due to lack of funds and assistance in planning and building such a system. In 2016, as a Peace Corps volunteer living in the community, I asked the Saint Cloud Rotary club for financial support to build a new water system.

Objective

To share my experience during my Peace Corps service of building a water system in a rural community in the Dominican Republic with the support and participation of the Saint Cloud Rotary Club, the Dajabon Rotary Club, local engineers, and the local community. This information can help other medical students, who may have been or become actively engaged in their communities,⁷⁻⁸ build similar water systems and related infrastructure in the Dominican Republic or other Caribbean countries to provide adequate amounts of clean water to these communities.

The Water Project

The water project was divided into three stages. The first stage was the installation of solar panels in a large field in Sabana Larga

to retrieve solar energy to capture solar energy for generation of electricity (*Figure 1A*). This electricity was used to pump water from an already existing well 140 feet below ground. The water from the well was pumped to a newly built water tank described below. The solar panels were purchased in the nearby city of Dajabon and were transported and assembled by local community members.

The second stage was the placement of a 25,000-gallon water tank to provide sufficient water for the growing population of Sabana Larga (*Figure 1B*). The tank was equipped with valves and piping to each home. All the materials were purchased in one hardware store located in the city of Dajabon. All the items aligned with the local culture and technology available. The water tank was designed by local engineers and was constructed by community members. The Saint Cloud Rotary Club came to Sabana Larga in June 2017 for one week to help with the construction under the supervision of the engineers.

The third stage was the distribution of the water filtration systems to each household, the primary school, and the clinic (*Figure 1C*). Bio Arena, a Dominican company located in Dajabon, installed 125 water filters in 123 households, the primary school, and the local clinic. Prior to the distribution of water filters, most homes purchased water in plastic jugs or "botellon" from large trucks that pass by every other day. Each botellon holds five gallons and costs 150 pesos (~2.70 USD) for a new bottle or 40 pesos (~0.72 USD) for a refill. Each household used at least one botellon a day and the cost of such purchases represented a financial burden for many families. Households that were not able to afford the botellon instead used river water for drinking, introducing associated health risks.

The construction of the water system was successfully implemented between April 2017 and June 2017. The main aim of the water project was to increase access to clean water and reduce water insecurity for the community.

¹ Second Year Medical Student. Florida International University Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine, Miami, United States.

About the Author: Rosemary Wright is currently a second-year medical student at Florida International University Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine in Miami, United States.

Correspondence:

Rosemary Wright.

Address: 11200 SW 8th St Ste AHC2, Miami, FL 33199

Email: racos062@fiu.edu

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Discussion

Several lessons were learned during the water project implementation. First, it was recognized that community involvement at every step of the project was imperative. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I arranged several community meetings to listen to the needs of the community (Figure 1D), understand future plans for building a new water system, and discuss the importance of the maintenance of such a system once established. The meetings also focused on local customs and traditions, leading to a stronger relationship between the community members and the other stakeholders, fostering a positive working relationship.

Second, a water committee was formed at the time of planning to oversee construction, performance, and maintenance of the water system. This was crucial because ultimately the community would take over the project. The committee consisted of ten members, each with a specific role. One concern for me was that only three women were included in the committee, and their roles were primarily administrative e.g., secretarial, with minimal decision-making responsibility. I recommend equal gender representation in all organizations and intervention programs in the future to empower women and girls.

Figure 1. Different Stages of Implementation of the Water Project in Sabana Larga, Dominican Republic.



Legend: **A:** Solar panels for electricity generation to pump water from the well. **B:** The 25,000-gallon water tank to store water for the community. **C:** Schematic of the Bioarena filters that was distributed to 123 households, the primary school, and the clinic. **D:** One of the many community meetings to discuss water-related needs.

Lastly, new skills were acquired during the process. Several community members gained construction skills; for maintenance and when repairs are needed, these community members will know how to fix the problem independently. If properly used with care, water systems last for decades. Financial management skills were also developed. The water committee was required to collect 50 pesos (~1 USD) from every family at the end of each month to maintain the water system. Ongoing financial responsibility will be required to ensure long term sustainability of the water system. I personally gained valuable communication and project management skills coordinating the diverse activities

involved and communicating with multiple stakeholders during the process.

The new water system in Sabana Larga was successfully implemented with the help of several stakeholders including members of the local community and external partners. The new water system has improved access to clean and safe drinking water for the families, leading to a healthier community and better quality of life for everyone.

Summary – Accelerating Translation

Título: Mi experiencia de construir un sistema de agua en una pequeña comunidad rural en la República Dominicana

Sabana Larga es una comunidad rural con 230 familias ubicada en la provincia de Dajabón en el noroeste de la República Dominicana. Hay poca lluvia durante todo el año. La falta de agua impide que las familias se bañen, laven, limpien y cocinen. Todas las familias de la comunidad se preocupan por las condiciones del agua. La construcción de un nuevo sistema de agua ha sido una prioridad para la comunidad durante muchos años, pero la razón que no hay un proyecto todavía es la falta de fondos y asistencia para construir este sistema de agua. Mi objetivo para este documento es compartir mi experiencia durante mi servicio en el Cuerpo de Paz de construir un sistema de agua en una comunidad rural en la República Dominicana con el Club Rotario de Saint Cloud, el Club Rotario de Dajabón, los ingenieros locales y la comunidad local. Esta información puede ayudar a otros voluntarios u organizaciones a construir sistemas de agua similares en la República Dominicana u otros países del Caribe para dar suficiente cantidad de agua limpia a las comunidades.

Entre abril de 2017 y junio de 2017 se implementó con éxito el nuevo sistema de agua en Sabana Larga. El sistema de agua mejoró el acceso a agua potable limpia y segura para todas las familias de la comunidad.

Se aprendieron muchas lecciones durante del proceso. Primero, era importante que la comunidad se involucrara en cada paso del proyecto. El

voluntario del Cuerpo de Paz organizó varias reuniones comunitarias para escuchar las necesidades de la comunidad, considerar planes futuros para construir un nuevo sistema de agua y hablar sobre el mantenimiento del sistema de agua. En segundo lugar, se formó un Comité de Agua en el momento de la planificación para supervisar el correcto funcionamiento y mantenimiento del sistema de agua. Esto fue crucial porque la comunidad se haría cargo del proyecto en el futuro. Una cosa que observé fue que las mujeres en el comité de agua solo tenían roles simbólicos. Estos puestos dan poca o ninguna responsabilidad. Recomiendo la representación equitativa de género en todas las organizaciones y programas de intervención en el futuro para empoderar a mujeres y niñas. Por último, se adquirieron nuevas habilidades durante el proceso. Varios miembros de la comunidad consiguieron habilidades de construcción; si se necesitan reparaciones, estos miembros de la comunidad sabrían cómo solucionar el problema sin participación de extranjeros. Si se usan correctamente con cuidado, los sistemas de agua duran décadas. También se desarrollaron habilidades de gestión financiera. El Comité de Agua estaba obligado a recolectar 50 pesos de cada familia al final de cada mes para mantener el sistema de agua. Conseguí habilidades de comunicación y gestión de proyectos, ya que se esperaba que coordinara varias actividades y me comunicara con múltiples partes interesadas durante el proceso.

El nuevo sistema de agua mejoró el acceso a agua potable limpia y segura para las familias, lo que llevó a una comunidad más saludable y una mejor calidad de vida para todos.

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