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Sr. Monica Ichife stands in front of the community garden in Konzalendo, Malawi, on Sept. 26, 2023. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)



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Sr. Monica Ichife, a member of the Religious Sisters of Charity, a congregation of religious women founded by Mary Aikenhead in Dublin in 1815, has been on mission in Thyolo, Malawi, one of the poorest African countries, since 2021. In this region, the major concern for locals is access to clean water and their main source of daily sustainability is agriculture. The water is prone to cholera and other waterborne diseases, because many people fetch drinking water from the same stream in which they bathe and wash clothes and cooking utensils.

For the last three years, four sisters have been involved in ensuring that the people have access to clean drinking water through facilitating water pumps, as well as initiating irrigation farming to attain all-year-round substantial and commercial food production. Srs. Imelda Sibanda, Mairead Ni Chuirc, Pereka Nyirenda and Ichife are fully dependent on congregational funding, funding agencies and individuals.

The sisters of this international congregation engage themselves in education, health care, social and pastoral care, and human rights issues. Their communities are in Ireland, England, Scotland, California, Nigeria, Zambia and Malawi.

The sisters held a meeting with the local development officer of the district to consider the possibility of establishing a committee of chiefs, community members and government officials to plan for water infrastructure projects on a larger scale.



A water pump is installed at Mpholiwa village, Malawi, on Feb. 1, 2022. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

With support from a few individuals in Ireland, 14 communities in Malawi are benefiting through collaborative efforts to have a manual water pump installed. The pump flooring and surrounding areas are constructed to irrigate nearby farmland.

Ichife agreed to speak with GSR on the topic.

***GSR*: Can you describe the current water situation in Malawi?**

Ichife: One in three people in Malawi currently don't have access to clean water — but in rural areas the percentage rises to about three in four people who don't have access. According to WaterAid, 10.4 million people don't have access to a decent toilet (from a population of 21 million). That's almost half the population.

Providing access to clean water and sanitation for all is a government priority but reaching the goal is not happening quickly. In rural areas like our own, most people

draw water from streams, those same streams are where they wash clothes and cooking utensils as well as where they bathe.

So, the risk of illness related to water consumption is a significant issue. Drought is often an issue as a result of climate change and leads to low agricultural produce, except for those who are into irrigation farming.



Women wash clothes at the stream in Konzalendo village in Malawi on Jan. 21, 2023. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

Why does the community come to you to solve this water problem?

Because here in the religious community, we have borehole water, so it gives them an idea that they can be helped. If the sisters have something like this, then maybe they can be helped.

Now the government also tries to help, but not on a general note. The people in townships have more access to clean water than in rural areas.

How far is the distance for some of the locals to come to get clean water?

The distance to most of the dug wells with manual pump is 1,000 meters to 2 kilometers, because the well is dug below the hills where they have the running streams, and the boreholes bring the water closer to their homes up the hills.

For those who might be unaware, can you tell us more about the infrastructure and why is the water like this?

Many Malawians are based in rural areas without infrastructure. The road network is very poor with few tarmacked roads. Many villages are in areas that are difficult to access on dirt roads whose terrain is difficult for vehicles. Most Malawians living in rural areas spend long hours walking to trading centers from their villages as there is very limited transport available.



Girls return from the stream with their filled buckets of water at Mphatso village, Malawi, on Oct. 1, 2021. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

Local governments depend on the federal government for funding to initiate projects. However, a major factor is that corruption often plays a part in preventing the implementation of projects.

Climate change and deforestation are also impacting water supply, either by rivers and streams drying up, or severe weather conditions causing rainwater to fill the

rivers/streams with mud washed down from the mountains.

What kind of diseases can people expect to be affected by if they drink the local unfiltered water?

Diarrhea is a big problem, especially for children under the age of 5 years. A study published by the National Library of Medicine on diarrhea in young children found that the prevalence of the disease is almost 25% higher among children aged 12-23 months than any other age group.

Children from the southern region of Malawi in particular, have a higher prevalence of diarrhea at 27% compared to the northern region at 19%, according to the National Library of Medicine.

Diarrhea is not the only disease affecting Malawi; cholera is also a risk from drinking unclean water and there have been several outbreaks of cholera in the past few years.

This has provided the motivation by the Religious Sisters of Charity to help prevent and reduce illness by installing water pumps in communities where we have a presence across Malawi. We want to help people have more access to clean water sources and places that are nearer to where they live.



A local running stream in Mphatso village, Malawi, where the people bathed and drank before they got a water pump on June 22, 2021 (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

In what other ways is the life of locals affected by not having access to clean water?

The long walk to the source of water and climbing up and down the hills affects especially the lives of women and girls, who are the main water carriers. It affects the ability of young girls to attend school regularly as they are kept home to carry water and do other tasks. This fundamentally weakens any educational progress for females. Not only that, but it impacts their health prospects and physically we see lower-back-pain issues from the regular carrying of heavy weights.

In some unfortunate cases, in particular where there is a long distance to travel to a well, there have been incidents where girls are abused or attacked. The implications of this have also resulted in [many pregnancies for] young women between the ages of 15 years and 18 years in these communities and again that means an end to that woman's education as she moves to family responsibilities. These pregnancies cause

the population to increase in villages, causing further scarcity of those precious resources.

Water collection is essential in a village and even for those women who want to send their daughters to school the added burden of collecting water to their already numerous tasks, like cooking, farming, collecting firewood for cooking, etc., never decreases.



Clothes washed at the stream of Mpholiwa village in Malawi on March 15, 2022, dry spread out rocks or in the grass, as a girl waits to take them home afterward. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

What water projects did your community propose?

The Religious Sisters of Charity became involved in 2014 when we discussed the matter with the local people. We were proud to be able to help because our mission is to seek to fundamentally help the poor within our communities.

We are also interested in bringing positive change to the environment and the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals. Goal 6 aims to provide clean water and sanitation to all by 2030. That goal is important to us as we see the huge effect that the lack of clean water can have.

The Religious Sisters of Charity's founding charism is service for the poor and we feel this is an important area of outreach to the people here. In 2014, we worked with the district development officer and Misean Cara (an Irish agency funding missionaries through the government's Irish Aid Project).

Unlike [nongovernmental organizations] such as WaterAid, who operate in Northern Malawi, our goal is not just to provide clean water. The Religious Sisters of Charity provide a variety of training programs and initiatives to the communities where we are established and live. However, when we receive requests from villages for new water pumps or pump upgrades, we try to help where our funds allow.



People of the Nthumbizira community in Konzalendo village in Malawi gather with parish priest Fr. Daniel Makwiti Sept. 12, 2022, for the opening ceremony and blessing of a newly installed water pump. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

We will continue to work with the district water development officer, the communities themselves, the area water mechanic, and often with the chiefs in the area requesting a pump or a borehole. Since 2022, we have provided 15 manual pumps and two boreholes.

In each small village, there can be between 40 and 60 families who benefit from the pump. It is so amazing to see the many benefits this brings to the day-to-day lives of these families.

Our work ensures that locals have access to clean, safe water that is closer to their homes than a stream would be. That is the most important change for them. The borehole brought the water to the people and saved them from walking down into the valley to draw their water.

Women and girls in many cases still must carry the water uphill to their homes, often a journey of more than 1,000 meters, but the fact that the water is clean and there is less likelihood of waterborne diseases makes a huge difference to the health and quality of life of the locals.

The Religious Sisters of Charity continue to work in Malawi to provide clean water to villages where possible.

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What is your role in this mission?

My involvement in this mission is to help people to have access to clean water and to reduce the amount of frequent recurrence of disease that affects their lives and their health in particular, then to improve the quality of their life, their ways and their standard of living. Because if they have good health, of course, the quality of their life will improve with the help of clean water. It reduces the amount of diseases and improves the quality of lifestyle.

It also raises their dignity because they are all involved. It's not just the sisters who are involved, they have their own contributions toward the progress of their standard of living. When we give them that awareness, it gives them more encouragement and zeal.

They know they have to look after the pump. We don't just install the pump and leave them at it. We encourage them to form a caretaker committee that would look after the pump should anything happen. Because if anything happens, who repairs it?



A young woman drinks from the installed water pump at Mphatso village in Malawi on Oct. 1, 2021. (Courtesy of Monica Ichife)

Are they going to wait for the sisters or the government officials to come to repair it? No, they have their community efforts by contributing money to maintain the pump so that it lasts for them. So they are happy to do that.

Why is this project important to you?

This project is important to me so that their level of poverty is reduced and the number of those who ask for water and who are hospitalized is reduced.

Also, during drought, the production of farm crops is reduced. Now, our involvement is to help directly with the irrigation of the water. To channel the water with some

kind of pipe to the farm so that when there is no rain, the water generated from the rock supplies the farmers and helps with the growth of food crops.

Those who do irrigation farming all year round have food crops, but those who do not have no food within the area that we are in. Last year, they could not afford their staple food which is called *nsima* (maize meal). They eat that three times a day if there is nothing else to eat. But they have to grow it to get this food.

Last year, it was so bad, they grew their maize, but there was no harvest.

This year, we hope the production will be more for them because we started to have rain. But those who are doing irrigation farming have no problem with the local food.