



Jacinta Atiir with her daughter Doras Akaru and other children, Chokchok, Turkana, Kenya

‘Now even our spoons are clean!’: SWIFT brings safe, sustainable water to residents of Chokchok

What has changed?

Few residents of the arid county of Turkana in northwest Kenya have adequate access to water. In the village of Chokchok, women and children would get up at 4 a.m. with the first crowing of the cockerels and walk 4km to the nearest water point, where they would queue up to collect as much water as they could carry the long distance home on their heads in the heat.

‘We only had time to go and collect water once a day,’ says Jacinta Atiir, describing the burden of carrying the 20-litre jerry cans. ‘We would often go to bed thirsty because the water was finished, and not drink until water had been collected the next day.’

Jacinta, who has five children, said she could only carry enough water for cooking and drinking; there wasn’t enough for personal hygiene, or for cleaning cooking utensils. Diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases were common.

Now, however, as a result of work done under the SWIFT programme, Jacinta and other Chokchok residents have access to all the clean, safe water they need in the village itself, and no longer spend hours each day walking and queuing to come home with barely enough to meet their needs. ‘It has changed all our lives,’ says Jacinta simply.

How has the change been achieved?

Under the SWIFT programme, Oxfam has laid a 4km pipeline to carry water to Chokchok from a shallow well. It has installed two PVC tanks, each able to hold 10 cubic metres of water, and built two water kiosks, from which residents can access as much water as they need.

Oxfam is now training the community to set up a committee to oversee the operation and maintenance of the new system.

Why does it matter?

Among the many benefits Jacinta lists of having access to water in the village are that she and her family are now able to wash themselves regularly and keep their cooking utensils clean, rather than simply rubbing them with their hands as they did in the past. Like the rest of the community, they are suffering less from diarrhoea and other water-borne diseases as a result.

‘If you came before this kiosk was here, you would find us all with dirty faces, dirty hands, and dirty clothes,’ she says. ‘Now, even our spoons are clean!’

The new water system, which will see a pipeline connected directly to the school in Chokchok, has also meant that children are no longer sent to collect water and missing classes as a result. Jacinta’s son David Eruno,

who is around 14, says he used to miss one-two hours of lessons a day through collecting water and firewood.

‘Now we can attend classes with no problems,’ David says. ‘I can even bathe in the morning and get to school on time for the start of lessons.’

Now that she no longer spends hours collecting water from a distant kiosk, Jacinta is using the extra time to collect palm leaves instead, which she uses to make brooms. She sells these at the market in Lodwar town for around 20 Kenyan shillings each, and uses the money to buy food and clothes for her family, including school uniforms.

She also has more time to collect firewood for cooking, and she and her husband have started a small kitchen garden behind one of the new water kiosks, to ensure that even water that is spilt is not wasted. ‘We are growing sorghum, maize and sweet potatoes,’ she says.



Jacinta Atiir collecting water from the kiosk

The presence of water has brought about another change too: the county government has begun constructing a health centre in the village, something it couldn’t do before, because water was needed to make the cement blocks for the walls.

Peter Esuron, one of the village elders, believes the fact that Chokchok residents are no longer absent for much of the day while they collect water has been a strong factor in this and other developments, as community members are now available to meet with representatives of local government and other agencies.

‘We can have meetings, the government can hold functions here and we can get information, compared with before when we were in the dark about the services that could have been available to us,’ he says.

What are the challenges?

The big challenge now is for the community at Chokchok to take over the operation and maintenance

of the new water system and ensure its long-term sustainability. The kiosks must be protected from damage, and charges must be introduced for the water, which is currently free, in order to pay for the upkeep of the system.



Jacinta Atiir making brooms from palm leaves

How will the challenges be met and what makes this change sustainable?

Jacinta describes how, concerned about children playing around the new water kiosk, she took it upon herself to ask the village pastor for a padlock and key, so that it could be secured.

‘I have the key because I live the closest to the kiosk, but people can collect it at any time,’ she says. ‘I am a church elder, and so I felt I should take that responsibility and make it happen.’

Oxfam has worked to ensure Chokchok residents have a clear understanding of the need to charge for water in future, so that they do not have to depend on others to keep the new water system going.

“It has changed all our lives... I am passionate about maintaining the water here”

It is currently training community members to maintain the water system, and working with them to set up a water management committee, which will be elected by villagers and will be made up of an equal number of men and women.

Jacinta is desperately hoping she will be chosen to be on the water committee, because she feels so strongly about ensuring that the new water system continues to function for years to come.

‘I am passionate about maintaining the water here,’ she says. ‘I don’t want to see it mismanaged, and I don’t want to have to go back to collecting water from that far away place at the river.’

Stories and photos collected by Jane Beesley, freelance humanitarian communications specialist, and edited by Emma Feeny (Oxfam).

The SWIFT Consortium works to provide access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene to people in Kenya and DRC, and builds capacity to ensure services are sustainable. It is funded with UK aid from the British people.

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