What has changed?
Katungulu is a rural village in South Kivu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). In the past, the women of the village had no alternative but to make a two-hour round-trip to a river to collect contaminated water. They would make the journey first thing in the morning, and again in the evening, tired after a day spent working in the fields.

The scarcity of water meant that villagers couldn’t wash themselves, their children or their clothes. ‘It was hard to keep everything clean, because we had so little water and it was too far to go and collect more if you ran out,’ remembers Mbilizi Malelani, 38. ‘I have seven children, so I never had enough water.’

The issue was also a source of conflict. ‘There used to be arguments in the household. Sometimes our husbands would want to wash, but there was no water and it was too far to go and collect some,’ says Neema Nakitongo, 50, who has nine children.

Defecation took place mostly in the bush surrounding the village; the few latrines were dirty and poorly maintained; food was left uncovered outside; rubbish was left to rot around the village; and hand-washing with soap or ash wasn’t practised. Diarrhoea, malaria and water-borne diseases were rife, with children suffering in particular.

Now, however, as a result of work done through the SWIFT programme, the community in Katungulu has access to clean, safe water in the heart of the village. ‘Now water is so close you can wash whenever you want!’ says mother-of-three Tengeneza Wabikwa, 27. Many families have constructed latrines with ‘tippy-taps’ where they can wash their hands, and pits where they can dispose of their rubbish. Hygiene behaviour has improved dramatically.

How has the change been achieved?
The Healthy Villages and Schools (Villages et Écoles Assainis) approach is a step-by-step process of village mobilisation that is supported by DRC’s Ministry of Public Health and UNICEF. Under the SWIFT programme, Tearfund is supporting Katungulu to implement the approach.

Tearfund has constructed a new gravity-fed water system at nearby Lusenda, from which water is piped to a number of taps in Katungulu. Tearfund has also helped the community elect a ‘healthy village’ management committee, with a water sub-committee which collects fees from each household to pay for maintenance and repairs to the system.

The management committee is overseeing the process of working towards ‘healthy village’ status,
and Tearfund has trained a number of ‘community
motivators’ in hygiene awareness. They now visit
each household to check that good hygiene behaviour
is being practised, including keeping latrines clean,
installing ‘tippy-taps’ or other facilities to encourage
hand-washing as people leave the toilet, and
disposing of rubbish in designated pits.

Why does it matter?
Katungulu’s women report a sharp drop in the
incidence of sickness in the village since they
received access to clean, safe water and the ‘healthy
village’ process began.

‘We have seen a big difference here,’ says Neema.
‘There are less water-borne diseases, and my family
no longer gets diarrhoea like they used to. We can
breathe better, because people have clean latrines
and no longer throw faeces into the bush.’ The fights
over water with her husband have stopped, she adds,
‘and our husbands are much cleaner!‘

“We didn’t have anyone to talk to
about women’s hygiene before”

Faila Angelani, 43, agrees. ‘I have eight children and
I was always taking them to the clinic because they had
diarrhoea,’ she says. ‘Now I don’t need to, because they
are no longer getting diarrhoea like they did when we
were getting water from the river. We all feel better now.’

She adds: ‘And we are less tired, because now after
we finish working in our fields, we don’t have to spend
another two hours collecting water from the river, and
that makes us very happy.’

Faila says the women of Katungulu have also greatly
appreciated learning about personal cleanliness. ‘We
didn’t have anyone to talk to about women’s hygiene
before,’ she says. ‘We’ve heard about infections, what
causes them, how to prevent them and that some can
be cleared up with good hygiene.’

What are the challenges?
The challenge for Katungulu now is to maintain the
changes that have been implemented in the village, and
in particular the functioning of the new water system,
which has made such a difference to the women’s lives
and which has been handed over to the community
by Tearfund.

‘We want to maintain this system,’ says Tengeneza.
‘We want it to carry on. We don’t want to lose it now.’

How will the challenges be met and what makes this
change sustainable?
The establishment of the water sub-committee and
new payment system should ensure the long-term
functioning of the water kiosk in the village. Each
household pays 500 Congolese Francs a month
(£0.37) for water, which can be used for repairs and
maintenance, and Tearfund has trained six residents
of the area served by the Lusenda water system as
plumbers, for the management committee to employ
when necessary.

‘This is for sustainability,’ says Tengeneza. ‘If there
are any problems, the money can be used to repair
the system.’

Katungulu’s community motivators are clearly
focused on ensuring the changes in hygiene
and sanitation behaviour are lasting, and the
‘management committee has even joined forces
with a neighbouring community, to share tools and
discuss how to prevent damage to the water system.

Tengeneza for one is keen to pass on what she
has learned, to ensure the residents of Katungulu
continue to reap the rewards of the ‘healthy village’
process in future.

‘Now I want to train others, so they can benefit
from this programme,’ she says.