What has changed?
Soya is a rural village in North Kivu, in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In the past, the community relied for water on a source a 20-minute walk away, but this was only available during the wet season. During the dry season, villagers collected water from a stream.

‘The problem was that it wasn’t permanent. Sometimes there was water and sometimes there wasn’t,’ says Kahindo Kitambala, 35, who lives with her husband and five children, who are aged between 2 and 15.

‘During the dry season it wasn’t available. During this time we would collect water from a stream. The family used to get a lot of sicknesses and diarrhoea,’ she remembers.

Kahindo’s family had no latrine; they would defecate in the bush, in an area behind their house, and were unaware of the importance of washing their hands afterwards.

‘My family would often get diseases because of all the flies and germs that were around. I felt bad,’ Kahindo says. ‘The children often got stomach aches, sicknesses and skin problems. At night there were a lot of mosquitoes around. It was very difficult.’

Now, however, as a result of work done through the SWIFT programme, the community in Soya has access to safe water all year round. Like many others, Kahindo and her family have a latrine with a ‘tippy-tap’ where they wash their hands, and a pit where they dispose of their rubbish. The health of the children in particular is reported to have improved significantly as a result.

How has the change been achieved?
The Healthy Villages and Schools (Villages et Écoles Assainis, or VEA) 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, Oxfam is supporting Soya to implement the approach through local partner Hydraulique sans Frontières (Hyfro).

Since September 2014, Hyfro has helped Soya establish a village management committee, and train ‘community motivators’ in hygiene awareness. It has assisted the village to upgrade latrines, dig rubbish pits, and promote hand washing, with the aim of supporting Soya to reach ‘healthy village’ status.

To obtain a coveted ‘healthy village’ flag, the village must have 80% clean water. At least 80% of residents will have hygienic latrines; 80% will have rubbish pits; 60% will know about hygiene - for example, washing hands before eating and after going to the latrine - and...
70% will know about water-related diseases and how to prevent them. The village will be cleaned once a week.

Hyfro has constructed four new water points in the village, from which clean, safe water is always available. It has also helped the community set up a water users’ committee, whose job it is now to collect money from households and use it to maintain the system.

Why does it matter?

For Kahindo, the most important change that has resulted from Hyfro’s support for Soya going through the Healthy Villages and Schools process is the improvement in the community’s health; and in particular, that of her children.

‘Since Hyfro has been coming here, we’ve stopped falling sick because we know about good hygiene. We know about washing our hands with ash after going to the toilet,’ she says.

‘Now we can collect clean water from one of the new water points that Hyfro constructed. There is always water there.’

And she adds: ‘The children are happier now because they are in good health and are not getting sick so regularly. There are less complaints about headaches, bellies and diarrhoea.’

As diarrhoeal diseases are one of the biggest causes of deaths in childhood, this is a hugely significant change, not just for Kahindo’s family but for the village.

Kahindo’s neighbour, Mathiba Kahambu, explains.

‘There has been a lot of conflict here over the years, and last year, when this project came here, people were being killed not far away,’ says Mathiba, 42, who lives with her husband and seven children.

‘Some people were afraid to have latrines because they thought they’d come from Rwanda. So they were worried that people would think they were connected to people there (in Rwanda), and if they had them (latrines), they would be killed.’

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

Fortunately, there are families in Soya – such as Kahindo’s - who were prepared to take the risk and build themselves a latrine. The survival of those families, and the benefits they enjoy from improved sanitation, have created their own momentum.

“We’ve stopped falling sick because we know about good hygiene. We know about washing our hands”

‘Now, people who don’t have a latrine want one, because they can see that the people who do have them have not been killed,’ explains Mathiba.

With the positive impacts of improved sanitation and hygiene behaviour being driven home by community motivators; with the sustainability of the water points being ensured by the new payment system that enables the water users’ committee to maintain them; and with the village management committee monitoring and overseeing progress, Soya looks set to be a ‘healthy village’ for a long time to come.

What are the challenges?

In addition to confronting long-held habits and ensuring the changes implemented under the ‘healthy village’ process are sustainable, North Kivu’s fragile status and history of violence created a specific challenge in Soya: the community’s fears about the construction of latrines.