

Upgrading traditional wells in north-west Namibia

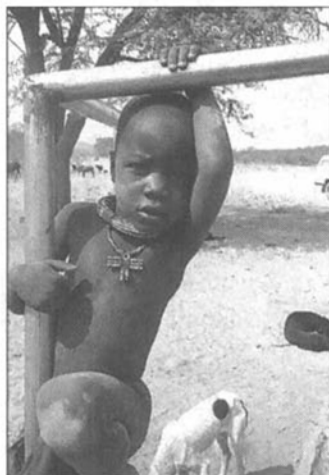
by Alex Bor

IN NORTH KUNENE, in north-west Namibia, people draw water from natural open waterpoints; fountains, small streams, and hand-dug, open wells. They have done so for centuries. North Kunene is a dry region with little rainfall. Approximately 17 000 people live in this area of about 49 000km² giving

What started out as a drought-relief operation, evolved into a post-drought rehabilitation programme. The shift to a sustainable water development programme began in November 1995. The overall goal of this water rehabilitation project is to decrease the risk of water-borne diseases among the target group,

appointed. Awareness, motivation, and participation are as important as the protection itself.

In the case of a natural spring, it is usually necessary to temporarily divert the water in order to build the brick and concrete works. The idea is to construct a concrete box in which the



Three scenes from Kunene's waterpoints: repairs, protection; and easy operation.

Red Cross Society, Namibia

the region a population density of less than 0.5 people per km².

The people of Kunene — the Ovahimba and the Ovaherero — are nomadic and sedentary pastoralists, fully dependent on their animals for their milk, meat, and hides. Other ways of surviving in this harsh environment of extremely dry bush savannah are non-existent. The few waterpoints are shared by people, cattle and, sometimes, wildlife. This concentration of people and animals turns the waterpoints into dark, foul-smelling pools, contaminated with excreta, and infested with bacteria of all kinds.

Waterpoint protection

Sometimes people attempt to protect their waterpoint, or part of it, by covering it over with roundwood or thorn bushes, which helps to keep the animals away and improves, to some extent, the quality of the drinking-water. But as the dry season advances, and the pools shrink or dry up, people have to remove the sticks to give their cattle access to the water.

Since 1992, the Netherlands Red Cross, in collaboration with its Namibian counterparts, has been active in protecting these traditional waterpoints at the request, and with the participation of, the pastoralists.

without disturbing the provision of water to their herds. The projects' objectives include the formation of waterpoint committees, and the training of a caretaker for each rehabilitated (protected) waterpoint.

Quality and control

In many cases a request for protection is made with the objective of protecting the quantity rather than the quality of the water. Water in a concrete water box lasts longer than in an open waterpoint as animals cannot reach it. Less water will evaporate or flow away to waste; people will have more control on the drawing of water from that particular waterpoint. Handpumps installed on the water boxes and hand-dug wells pump water to the cattle troughs without much spillage, also conserving water. Water for human consumption is drawn at the pump discharge just before it enters the cattle trough.

The Ovahimba and Ovaherero people's requests for waterpoint protection are made through the Red Cross Office. Each case is studied for feasibility and priority. After a waterpoint has been identified and, depending on its yield, the number of users, and technical aspects checked, a waterpoint committee is formed and a caretaker

fountain can be capped, equipped with an overflow if there is enough yield and a handpump for the people to draw their clean water, together with an inspection manhole for cleaning and maintenance. The overflow and the spillage from the pump-users will form a pond beyond the box, similar to the original waterpoint, for cattle and wildlife. Hand-dug wells are protected by a concrete slab, equipped with a hand-pump and an inspection manhole.

If there is insufficient yield for an overflow to form a pond outside the box, users can either provide their own cattle trough, which usually looks like a roughly hewn canoe or, under certain conditions, can request a steel trough from the Department of Water Affairs.

Once a waterpoint is properly protected, the waterpoint committee assumes responsibility for its maintenance, funded by user fees. Small items, such as grease for the pump, or a bag of cement to repair a crack in the concrete, are bought by the committee. More complicated repairs are sorted out by the committee with help from the Department or the Red Cross.

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