

Real Lives: Nicaragua, Central America*



After Hurricane Mitch in 1998, parts of Nicaragua had no clean water. With no other options, these children wash themselves in a muddy pool in the street.

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The river used to be the only source of water for the people of Piedras Grandes, Nicaragua. As a result, waterborne illnesses affected many children and their families. But now, partly through the efforts of 16-year-old María and other young people, the village is a much healthier place to live.

In February 2002, the community decided something had to be done. They formed a Drinking Water and Sanitation Committee, representing 60 villagers from 15 households. With UNICEF's support, the committee oversaw the installation of a well and set out to improve hygiene by tapping into the enthusiasm and inventiveness of young people.

María was one of those who volunteered to be a health representative. "I make door-to-door visits every two weeks to see that the households are keeping their backyards clean, using their latrines well, burning and burying their trash, and eliminating pools of water where mosquitoes might breed," explains María. Her 14-year-old assistant Liset completes the list: "We also check that receptacles containing water are covered to avoid contamination and that empty ones are cleaned out."

This is a partnership between young people and adults; older village residents know what services they need, can afford to build, and are able to maintain. But the state water company has made child participation the key to its water and sanitation projects—not a bad idea in a country in which just over half the population is under 18. And young people like María are developing the leadership skills future water managers will need.

The well in Piedras Grandes is already transforming people's lives. Today, the villagers use clean water rather than river water and maintain hygienic conditions in their homes. Illnesses caused by unhygienic conditions no longer run through families. The children and young people are building a healthier future for themselves and their own children.

*Source: UNICEF Voices of Youth http://www.unicef.org/voy/explore/wes/explore_1879.html