

Safe Drinking Water comes to Qamaryan*

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As we parked our car in the middle of the village an old man approached us happily and welcomed us saying “*bakhehr behn*”. “We have come to see the village and the water project, we are from UNICEF, the agency who funded the works.” I said. “It is a very good thing.” Said Mulla Ahmad leading us to the water reservoir tank constructed near the upper village boundary. “It saves the water and keeps it clean,” he continued, “the *kani* is high in the mountain and the stream was previously flowing down uncovered into the village where our women used to come to do their water work and collect water for drinking.”

Mulla Ahmad, is the village elder and *mukhtar* of Qamaryan. He was among the first settlers in this village arriving more than 35 years ago. A tall slim man of 69, he looks older than his age - yet he is quite nimble and straight. “I have 6 children, 3 sons and 3 daughters, the eldest is 12.” Responding to our surprise as why so young were his children, he added laughing” they are from my second wife. From my first woman I have only 2 sons who are married and live separately, and their mother lives with the younger one.” Many villagers like to show off their multiple marriages but Mulla Ahmad was possibly not in hurry to disclose it in front of a foreign lady.

Qamaryan is located 130km north east of Erbil city , North of Iraq, in the deep valley of Khalan at the foot of the Bradost mountains. As Mulla Ahmad recalls it was inhabited about 35 years ago. When it was destroyed in 1988 some 35 families were living there. From 91 onwards previous inhabitants started to return and reconstruct their houses. Now 40 families, 230 persons’ share the land and water. Livelihood depends on breeding sheep, goat and cows. “There is no cultivable land”, says the *mukhtar*, ” as you see it is a rocky steep land not even fit for dry farming. We have only some vineyards and a little wheat.” But thanks to the plenty of rain and winter snow falls water is abundant which with plenty of pasture available gives the villagers more security than they could expect in the crowded towns.

To ensure access to safe drinking water UNICEF has supported the building of a gravity fed drinking water system in the village. The project ended last autumn. The water system included construction of catchment and collection tanks at the spring mouth, laying 450 meters of pipes from the fountain mouth to a concrete – made water storage tank in the village boundary. From this tank the water is distributed through a pipe network to five end user tap stands each serving several families .

The work does not end here. The system needs maintenance and the water needs care. UNICEF supports local authorities to train the villagers to maintain the system and chlorinate the water. Three people have been trained in Qamaryan. Simple-to-use chlorinator devices are provided to all systems. The plastic device is dipped into the storage tank where it floats and keeps on adding chlorine to the water from a dissolving purification tablet. “Each tablet” Mulla Ahmad says “lasts for 10 days. Then we add another one. We have recently received a bucket of 26 which is enough for about 9 months.” The 3 men are also responsible for taking care of the pipes, tanks and tap stands.

It is hardly possible to quit a Kurdish village without being served a cup of tea. Mulla Ahmad invited us to his home and we took the opportunity to see his family. Ayesha, a young cheerful lady, could hardly hide her surprise and joy of seeing a visiting team entering her *diwakhan*. Having a

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small child on her right shoulder, she welcomed us pleasantly and confidently then she disappeared for a while to prepare tea and came back to sit by the door. But we insisted that she should come nearer so that we could chat. “ I am 30, this is Ameer, my youngest, ” she said pointing to the child on her shoulder.”. Others are 5,8,10,11, and 12 years old. Another son of one , died last summer.”

The young child perished from diarrhea. She had breast- fed all her children including the deceased. “ But for Ameer I am giving him additional powdered milk since my breast does not suffice.” “From where did you get the milk?” We asked. “ From the food agent.” She replied meaning the food rations supplied under oil-for-food programme by WFP. Truthfully inclusion of free milk formula in the food basket might have encouraged some mothers to bottle feed their children. “ We don’t buy wheat flour, we don’t buy rice, we don’t buy sugar and tea, we don’t buy cooking oil, we live on our ration,” said her husband,, “but we sometimes buy meat, fruits and vegetables.”

The wife was happy about the water project. A tap stand was some 20 meters from her house. “ It is very good. You see now I just go out of the house and collect my water” she said,” previously I had to go a great distance to collect water in heavy plastic and goat-skin containers for drinking, washing, and for all my family. Now I need not collect too much water in my house, only for drinking and cooking. I can go and wash my dishes and clothes at the tap stand. Before it was very tiresome. I was always busy bringing water.”

And she is right. Most of the burden of country life falls on women’s shoulders. They are taking care of the children, the cattle, the house and they participate in field work as well. And they are expected to have many children. Delivering safe drinking water at the house yard benefits women more than anyone else in a village. That is why Ayesha so sincerely calls it *very good*.
