



# Oxfam Impact

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## Tackling a deadly cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe with clean water—and song

Zimbabwe is in the grip of a cholera epidemic that has sickened 91,000 people and killed more than 4,000 of them. With clean water and public health education, Oxfam and its local partner organization are fighting the spread of the deadly disease.

By **Coco McCabe**

“CHOLERA OUTBREAK!!!!!!” shouts a sign posted on the outside of a government building in Mudzi, one of the harder hit areas of the country. The sign offers advice on what to do: “Drink water from safe sources.”

But in Mudzi, a rural district in the northeast corner of the country, that’s the heart of the trouble: clean water is hard to come by. For most people in the district, municipal water systems and indoor plumbing don’t exist. They rely on deep drilled wells, known as boreholes, for their water, which they lug home in jugs. More than 680 of these wells, outfitted with pumps, are scattered across the region, and in

good times, about 100 families rely on each borehole.

But lately, many of them have broken, and villages, strapped for cash in an economy crippled by hyperinflation, have no means to repair them. So, many people have turned to other sources for their drinking water, such as rivers and shallow wells, which bacteria can easily contaminate—and that’s why cases of cholera began to soar.

Austin Kanjere and Siriva Wengai are both “pump minders”—local men who help keep the community boreholes running. They have been working with Oxfam and its local partner, the Single Parents Widow(er)s Support Network, to repair some of the long-broken boreholes in Mudzi, a district in the northeast corner of Zimbabwe that has been hit hard by the country’s cholera outbreak. *Coco McCabe / Oxfam America*

Since December, Oxfam and its local partner, the Single Parents Widow(er)s Support Network, or SPWSNET, have been racing to provide access to clean water for thousands of families in Mudzi.

### **Clean water and education**

Oxfam’s plan, carried out with SPWSNET’s help, called for the rehabilitation of 120 boreholes. Coupled with that long-term investment in the wells has been a

rigorous program of community education focusing on the causes of cholera and its prevention.

Already Oxfam and SPWSNET have trained more than 100 village health workers—and plan to reach another 50. Their job is to share everything they know about cholera with their neighbors and to serve, in some cases, as data collectors for a new diarrhea early warning surveillance system that Oxfam is launching. The goal of the system will be to prevent future deadly outbreaks like the current one—an objective that will be served well by the breadth of the public health outreach now underway. By the end of March, Oxfam and SPWSNET plan to have reached all the households in Mudzi with messaging on cholera prevention and good hygiene practices.

The tools the public health promoters use? Songs, dance, and lots of good humor.

“Singing about feces—I never thought I’d hear that in my lifetime,” says one Zimbabwean aid worker.

In a place where many people have no electricity to power radios or TVs and where cell phone coverage is spotty at best, reaching large numbers of people with public health messages requires an innovative approach, and that’s what Oxfam’s outreach workers are doing with song—putting new words to familiar tunes. It’s working.

“Where we repair boreholes and come in with public health promotion, things are getting better,” says Sure Makuni, an

Oxfam public health promoter. “People did not have information about how the disease was contracted.”

### Fixed boreholes: 135—and counting

Boreholes have been Ronald Marozva’s passion. A public health engineer with SPWSNET, he is now spending his days coordinating teams of pump minders and village volunteers for the hard and sweaty work of fixing the boreholes. And they won’t stop until they run out of supplies. So far, they have restored 135—and counting. Each costs about \$1,100 to repair. But the impact of the investment is clear: For every borehole that’s repaired, several hundred people will again have access to clean water. And that’s what’s motivating Marozva.

“It’s like superman,” says Miriam Aschkenasy, a public health specialist for Oxfam, who watched him and a crew of workers in early December when they were dispatched to fix a well on the grounds of a school. “They came in. They looked at the problem. And a couple of hours later they had a working pump.”

For villagers like Wonderful Nyatsuto, that efficiency is hugely welcome. He was among the volunteers who came to help the day SPWSNET repaired a borehole about a mile and a half from his house. A well closer to Nyatsuto’s home had been contaminated, and the water was no longer safe to drink. Some of his neighbors had been relying on water from a nearby river. But with the outbreak of cholera, everyone was nervous. About 15 people from his



Berchani Chando gets ready to drink water from a deep well, known as a borehole, that Oxfam and its local partner organization have just repaired in a village in the northeast corner of Zimbabwe. *Coco McCabe / Oxfam America*

community had fallen sick, he said, and five had died.

With the repairs complete, water began to gush from the pump. Nyatsuto cupped his hands and let the cold, clean water run over them before scooping up a drink.

“Thank you very, very much,” he said. “We’ve got happy families now—and safe water.”

*To learn more about our cholera response, check out two audio blogs at <http://blogs.oxfamamerica.org/zimwater> or visit [www.oxfamamerica.org/zimbabwe](http://www.oxfamamerica.org/zimbabwe).*

## Do one more thing today: Give the gift of clean water



The crisis affecting Zimbabweans is thoroughly preventable. Yet the UN estimates that one billion people globally lack access to an improved water supply. And every day, diarrheal diseases cause about 6,000 deaths—many of them among children under 5. By supporting Oxfam America, you are working to change this.

If you want to do more, consider a unique gift-giving option that will help fund Oxfam’s continuing efforts to ensure access to clean water for all. Go to [oxfamamericaunwrapped.com](http://oxfamamericaunwrapped.com), and select from a range of gifts—water jugs, a water purifier, or a water pump. We’ll send a card with a personalized message to your loved one, and your donation will help poor people around the world.



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