

**WORLD WATER DAY 2011– INCREASING ACCESS TO SAFE WATER IN RWANDA**  
**By the Access Project**  
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Three years ago, Kofi Annan declared water and sanitation essential ingredients to living a life of dignity. Addressing a conference hall in Egypt filled with representatives from the World Health Organization he said: “We shall not finally defeat AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, or any of the other infectious diseases that plague the developing world until we have won the battle for safe drinking water, sanitation and basic health care.” Three years later, as the world marks [World Water Day](#), the battle is far from being won. Currently, more than one billion people in the world do not have access to reliable sources of clean drinking water, and water--borne illnesses claim nearly two million lives each year.

The Access Project was founded to improve health by applying business--inspired management techniques to public health. In Rwanda, the project targets the systemic deficiencies present in 80 health centers. Just one year ago, Ruhunda and Musha, two Access--supported health centers, had no running water. Located in Rwanda’s eastern district, Ruhunda and Musha are set among cavernous valleys and steep plateaus. Children traverse the hillside paths every day, balancing yellow jerry cans on their shoulders as they make the long, steep walk to the nearest public well. The health centers also depended on those wells for water, and on busy days, when there was no one available to fetch water, the health centers had to do without. As a result, physicians could not wash their hands between consultations, laboratory technicians faced major challenges in sterilizing equipment, and workers were unable to disinfect beds and floors.

With leadership from the Access Project and its Peace Corps Volunteers, and funding from [Water Charity](#), sinks were installed and running water connected to the Ruhunda and Musha health centers. Today, both centers benefit from running water and more than 37,000 people served by the health centers benefit from cleaner conditions and a higher standard of care.

Elsewhere in Rwanda, the Access Project staff and its partners have spearheaded other projects to install internal running water in health centers. Running water has been piped into three health centers in the northern volcanic district of Musanze, an accomplishment that has benefitted the more than 125,000 people who seek care at these facilities.



The water problem is just one infrastructure deficiency plaguing Rwanda's health facilities. Many health centers across Rwanda operate without electricity or running water. Health centers serve largely rural populations, 34 percent of whom do not have access to safe water (Rwanda Interim Demographic Health Survey 2008). Unsafe water, coupled with poor sanitation and hygiene, spread disease; in addition to the suffering, the sickness lowers productivity among both working adults and students, making it harder for families and communities to escape from poverty. Unsafe water has the greatest impact among children under five: Although Rwanda's child mortality rates have improved over the past five years, one in ten babies born still don't live to age five.

Providing safe water in health centers is essential to prevent additional disease among health center patients and staff. Not only does clean water enable equipment sterilization and hygienic care, but it also allows health professionals to promote good hygiene and hand washing through example. Through partnerships with [Rwanda Works](#), Rwanda's Ministry of Health, The Center for Global Safe Water at Emory University, and organizations such as [Water Charity](#), clean water facilities are now within reach for many Rwandans.

In May, Access will kick off a three--year partnership with [The Center for Global Safe Water at Emory University](#), [General Electric](#) and [Rwanda Works](#) to evaluate the feasibility of using membrane filtration to purify water sources at health centers. The goal of the project is to increase the availability of usable water for health centers and for the community. What's

more, the project will focus on health education training about water storage, hygiene, and sanitation. This new partnership ensure the sustainability of existing campaigns to improve hygiene practices to prevent the transmission of water--borne diseases and neglected tropical diseases such as intestinal worms.

More than halfway through the [Water for Life Decade \(2005--2015\)](#), the future of clean water for Rwanda is bright. Most Access--supported health centers now have sinks with running water and serve to demonstrate safe water practices to their surrounding communities. Within the next three years, Access and its partners will continue to expand purified drinking water sources and provide training for good hygiene and sanitation practices. On this World Water Day, Rwandans can envision a future where water will no longer be a source of contamination and disease, but rather a source of life, health and dignity.