

# Water all around

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*On the international World Water Day on 22 March, we must remember to give kind thoughts to the 800 millions of people, who do not have access to clean water.*

Imagine living in wooden houses built on piles in a lake - that is with water everywhere you look – even below! And this water is quite terribly contaminated and unhealthy, as it serves as the sewer of people and animals in the perimeter of several kilometres in a densely populated area.

Hence the circumstances of thousands of human beings from the Toffin people in Benin, who many years ago were faced with no other choice but to settle down on the broads of Lake Nokoué, and, as for some of these people, even in the lake, which is in fact a lagoon since it gives access to the Guinea Bay. Had they not fled into the lake and to the swampy areas of its broads, they would have been taken as slaves and sent to the American continent.

In total, approximately 125,000 Toffin people live at or in Lake Nokoué. They make their living primarily by fishery and, to a small extent, craftsmanship, trade and cattle breeding as well as by garden centres and farming on the few fields at the broads of the lake.

Being forced to drink contaminated water, you have to struggle with a low quality of life, because you are never fully in good health – and you are not able to perform to your maximum when it comes to income generating activities. And the perspectives are limited. A deteriorated child or young human being is less susceptible to all kinds of education.

Ten years ago, it was said that one fifth of the world's population did not have access to clean drinking water. Today, the number is approximately 800 millions, which sums up to only a little more than a tenth.

For the Toffin people, there is also hope. Emmaus International is strongly represented in Benin and has been since the end of the 80s. Back then, the movement was part of the civil society, which took part in provoking a peaceful change of political system causing the introduction of a democratic system which has ruled ever since.

The Emmaus project at Lake Nokoué - [http://emmaus-international.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=157&Itemid=129&limit=1&limit\\_start=2&lang=english](http://emmaus-international.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=157&Itemid=129&limit=1&limit_start=2&lang=english) is about drilling so deep for water that clean water surfaces. Nine villages with 70,000 inhabitants in total, more than half of the 125,000 Toffin people, have each had their own drill hole with derricks that, in all, supply 154 water pumps and 139 sanitary units with toilets

and washing facilities with water. Comprehensive outreach course activities enhance knowledge of water, sanitation and hygiene.

Emmaus thinks that you must collaborate with the weakest positioned human beings in every connection; but collaborating also means that the weak part needs to be strengthened in their ability to contribute, so that the external technical and financial involvement can be scaled down. Solidarity is to be perceived as “making solid”.

In order to promote this exact purpose, the Water Users Association has been established in Nokoué (= l'Association des Usagers et Acteurs de l'Eau et de l'Assainissement à Nokoué – AUAEAN). The association functions as the spokesman of the inhabitants in relation to the Emmaus project, and, some day, when the Emmaus engagement is to be scaled down, the association is meant to function as the spokesman towards the Sô-Ava municipality which, according to Beninese law, is to take over the formal responsibility of running the water and sanitation installations and charge the necessary user fee.

At the latest annual general meeting in AUAEAN on 11 December 2013, more than 250 people participated, according to [http://emmaus-international.org/images/stories/05\\_publications/06\\_eexpress/pdf/eexpress24\\_en\\_bd.pdf](http://emmaus-international.org/images/stories/05_publications/06_eexpress/pdf/eexpress24_en_bd.pdf) - not bad considering that, normally, it is said to be challenging to find an African popular association which holds more than 15 to 20 members.