

Christian Aid's Christmas Appeal: Impossible choices

At Christmas, we all have decisions to make, whether it's which presents to buy or who to invite for lunch. Some might be difficult, but none will compare to the impossible choice of drinking dirty water or none at all.

In South Sudan, the climate crisis is leaving people hungry, homeless, and without a means to earn a living. It is also forcing people to make impossible decisions. Combined with years of conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a growing humanitarian and hunger crisis. More severe and frequent floods and droughts are significantly disrupting lives. In 2020 alone, 1 million people were affected by floods. Most communities say flooding is the biggest and most likely risk they face.¹

Some of the most vulnerable communities to floods and droughts are those that are dependent on agriculture, such as in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state in South Sudan.

The flooding last year left families in the region without adequate food, water or shelter. It killed large numbers of livestock and destroyed crops. What's more, water-borne diseases increased due to contaminated water.

'We were in desperate need,' said Adut Mariu who lives in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state. Adut is a 27-year-old, married mother of three young children. 'To look after my children, they had to drink the dirty river water. The water has many diseases. There is cows' dung, there is donkeys' dung... People also wash in there.'

The River Makadh runs through Adut's village of Biet and was the community's only source of water. It is dirty and unreliable. It dries up during long periods of drought, and during heavy rainfall it rises to dangerous levels and spreads contaminated water.

Adut was forced to make an impossible choice. She had to give her children dirty water to drink, or none at all. So she gave them the dirty water, knowing it wasn't safe.

'When we used to collect river water, we would send our children to do it. I'd be so worried my son would fall into the river and drown,' Adut admits.

Flooding and droughts have become more frequent and severe in South Sudan because of the climate crisis.

Adut said: 'When the flood came, it came at full force. This village was under water. No one could move. The traders who went to the market couldn't find a way back. The children that went to school stopped going.'

'The flood destroyed everything. Because of the flood, crops were destroyed, cows and goats were dying because they had nowhere to graze. You would see chickens standing in the water and later see them dying. These floods cannot be stopped.'

Christian Aid's Humanitarian Programme Plan (HPP) in South Sudan is helping people in Northern Bahr el Ghazal state to stand strong against the climate crisis. The project is being delivered through Christian Aid's local partner, Support for Peace and Education Development Program (SPEDP).

The project takes a comprehensive approach to improve people's wellbeing and resilience. The main activity is the rehabilitation and construction of boreholes which brings clean drinking water to communities, whatever the weather.

Alongside these activities, the project also shares messages to improve hygiene and sanitation practices; provides farming training, tools and seeds to improve food security; shows communities how to build dykes to protect their homes from flooding; and offers opportunities to improve livelihoods through savings and loans groups (VSLAs) and training.

To date the project has helped almost 32,000 people access safe drinking water and provided some 1,900 households with farming support. But the need in these communities is still great. In many places, the boreholes are serving three times more people than they should be, and the dykes struggle against the ferocity of some storms.

Adut's community were able to build the borehole with support from SPEDP. They drilled a narrow shaft into the ground to extract water from a naturally occurring source. Above ground, a hand pump is used to drive the water to the surface.

'Now we get water from the hand pump. We don't send our children to the river,' Adut said. 'The water from the hand pump is very good. It's disease free. We drink it with peace of mind.'

The pump is helping the village's 700 families to gain access to clean drinking water. Water-borne diseases have fallen, and Adut has more time for other activities like farming. She's also the caretaker of the borehole and keeps it in good working order.

Although the borehole is lifechanging, there are still many challenges ahead for Adut's community. The borehole is being used by many more people than it should be. Some people travel miles to reach it. Clean water is in desperately short supply across the region.

To support Christian Aid's work in South Sudan and other countries suffering from the effects of climate change, you can give to its Christmas Appeal at caid.org.uk/christmas

With clean water, nutritious food and ways to earn money, mothers on the frontline of the climate crisis like Adut won't have to make such impossible choices.

ⁱ Assessment captured in Christian Aid's South Sudan team annual report 2020/2021.