

NEWSLETTER FROM CATHY BUCKLE IN ZIMBABWE



Come with me to the hand pump

4 September 2024



Dear Family and Friends

Come along with me to the borehole on the side of the road in urban Zimbabwe, a new part of my everyday life. Up soon after 03:30am I am getting ready to go to the nearest 'hand pump' long before dawn. Water hasn't come out of my taps for many weeks and so I have to go and get it at the 'hand pump' on the roadside. It is a manual, human-powered borehole that you have to pump by hand to get water from. This is Zimbabwe's answer to not providing water in taps to urban residences: sink a borehole on the side of the road and then just leave us to get on with it.

The sickening irony is that our taps are dry and yet the bills from the local Municipal authority keep coming, they keep charging us for water that doesn't exist. This year you can partly blame the drought for the chronic water shortage but in reality, corruption, poor management and decaying water infrastructure is crippling urban residential and business areas.

The stars are blazed across the darkness as I get to the hand pump and I look up for a moment to allow the beauty to give me perspective and strength before the toil starts. Jupiter and Mars are bright in the sky and Orion's Belt is as spectacular as always but there is no time to linger. I suck in my breath, zip up my jacket, lift my collar and start unloading buckets at the borehole.

Two of us are together at the borehole, you need two pairs of hands here and it is hard, hard work. My hands and arms ache, the muscles across my chest scream as I reach up to pull on the pole and pump the water up from underground. I can hardly reach the top of the handle and have to stand on tiptoes to get the momentum started and then the squeaking and clanking of the mechanism becomes a hypnotic rhythm to work to.

If you are first at the manual borehole pump you have to throw out the first forty or fifty litres, the water is dirty, cloudy and full of sediment which is not a good sign, but needs must and so we carry on. It takes about 30 pulls on the cold steel pipe to fill a twenty-litre bucket. If you aren't at the pump handle, you're at the buckets underneath the outlet. You must be ready so as not to waste a drop, as one bucket is full you must pull it out of the way with one hand and push the next empty bucket into place. Lids must be firmly secured and the full buckets moved out of the way. When both of us are exhausted we stop for a few minutes and load the full buckets. My back is breaking and shoulders aching and I look up, the sky is lightening and dawn is near. I have a handful of biscuits in my pocket, share them with my friend and we quickly recharge our energy.

As I get my breath back, I think of the [YouTube video](#) of Zimbabwe's grandiose new parliament and its long rectangular pool near the entrance to the building. Fountains and water overflowing down a wide stone stairway. The extravagance of it all is an absurd, insulting contradiction to the reality of our lives here at the hand pump before dawn in urban Zimbabwe. The gap between us and them grows ever wider by the day.



[Photo of front of Zimbabwe's new Chinese donated, US\$200 million parliament added from video]

Away in the distance the first wheelbarrow is coming, a man with four empty buckets is heading to the borehole. Quickly now we resume our chore, pumping, pulling, loading. The buckets are wedged tight, a rope to secure them so nothing will fall over, we don't want to lose a drop. As we finish at the borehole the man with the wheelbarrow arrives, we greet each other, its 05.30am.

He lines his buckets up at the pump outlet and takes up the mantle. As he pumps, a pick-up truck arrives carrying a 200-litre drum and twenty buckets. Another truck arrives, bigger, two drums, two big square tanks and a dozen buckets. The line is increasing, the wait getting longer.

In a couple of hours' time the ladies will come with their wheelbarrows and big plastic baths to do their laundry. Washing clothes on the roadside, rinsing and wringing them out and then loading them into buckets to take home. If I go to the borehole in the daytime we talk and laugh and joke. We are all the same here but the old ladies put me to shame as they pull bucket after bucket of water up from underground never seeming to tire. We are strong, they say, laughing, chiding me for my weak muscles.

The manual hand pump is both my saviour and my pain. Every drop of water in my home whether in a bowl to wash my face or clean my teeth, in a glass to drink, in a pot to cook or in a bucket to wash dishes or clothes, has been pulled from deep underground by my hands and carried into my home one bucket at a time. This is the reality of life for ordinary people in Zimbabwe in 2024.

There is no charge for this Letter From Zimbabwe but if you would like to donate please visit my website. Until next time, thanks for reading this Letter From Zimbabwe now in its 24th year, and my books about life in Zimbabwe, a country in waiting.

Ndini shamwari yenyu (I am your friend)

Love Cathy

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