

Mamas with a mission, and a syringe

These formidable no-nonsense women were shouting “Yes, we do!” before anyone thought of exhorting the world with “Yes, we can”. They have a deserved reputation for persuading their Great Lakes community to produce and drink safe water, and have made a business out of a necessity. Meet the Uzima Mamas.

In the multi-dimensional language that is Swahili, the term ‘uzima’ means any of abundance, or fullness, or wholeness, or health, or life, or clean water. Depending on the context. For dozens of Uzima Mamas in the greater Goma area of the Great Lakes in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it means all of them. And a thriving business.

The Mamas are just as multi-dimensional as the term Uzima itself. Depending on your profession. For development professionals who believe that making change possible comes down to behavioural change and social marketing, the Mamas’ hands-on sales technique is a jewel. For health professionals who say it all starts with exquisitely careful supply of water, and no messing with the standards, it exceeds in precision. For process managers who put their faith in ‘ownership or else’, this is a preaching lecture come true.

In an area where tens of thousands of households draw their water from the voluptuously contaminated Lake Kivu – described by one health worker as an “incubator for cholera” – the work of the Mamas is a subtle, sophisticated mix of health education, water utility company, entrepreneur, saleswoman and good neighbour.

They work, it seems, around the clock but the best time to see them is around 6am, on the roads between the lake and the scattered, seething settlements that grow endlessly on its shores. This is the time when the lines of women with jerry cans, buckets, bottles and jars of Kivu's worst waters are building up at the Mamas 'point-of-sale' kiosks. There, for the price of US\$ 2 cents a go, they patiently hold out their syringes and inject very precise doses of active chlorine into the whole gamut of water containers held out to them.

They refill their syringes from small plastic flasks containing five millilitres of the chlorine solution – bought from Antenna Technologies Grands Lacs, an increasingly business-like NGO which has grown into a major supplier of water treatment in the region. Antenna's Watasol approach – one of several innovations from this Geneva-based group of dedicated scientists and development professionals – lies behind it all. Its inventors have developed a line of electrolysis devices which produce active chlorine from water mixed with 25 grams of salt per litre. The Mamas' supplies come from the Maxi-WATA kit which, operating on a 12-hour shift (not always possible with Goma's renowned brown-outs and electricity lapses) can produce 180 litres of active chlorine. At the Watasol rule-of-thumb that 1 litre of solution is good for treating 4,000 litres of drinking quality water, the Maxi-WATA allows the treatment of 720,000 litres a day. Following standards set by the World Health Organization – an individual must have access to 20 litres of clean water per day for drinking, cooking and cleansing – one Maxi-WATA can serve 36,000 people a day. According to Antenna's founder, Denis von der Weid, the Watasol solution now delivers clean water for a potential 3,330,000 people in 45 countries. "When we reach 10 million, maybe the key message – Innovation. Ownership. Safe Water – will get noticed more." Maybe leave it to the Mamas, Denis?

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<http://syfia-grands-lacs.info/index.php5?view=articles&action=voir&idArticle=1301>

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Watasol at World Water Forum

The Watasol team will be at World Water Forum, exhibiting Watasol devices. Located all week at the Swiss Pavilion, 1422, it will present a special demonstration at 16:00 on Monday 16 March. It will also hold a competition for a daily draw to win a mini-WATA, at 18h00 at the Swiss Pavilion.

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