

FRIEND OR FOE?

Paradox of communities where river gives, takes life

■ Other communities relive ordeal with Guinea worm ■ They will have pipe-borne water by June—Govt

Water One World Solution, an international, non-profit organisation based in the United States of America, in its recent report, estimated that 3.5 million people die annually from water-related diseases. The report added that as many as 135 million preventable deaths will occur by 2020 if there are no proactive actions to improve clean water and sanitation supplies. Even though the projected year is still some distance away, the people of Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State, have already begun to record preventable deaths on a yearly basis as a result of lack of access to safe water. INNOCENT DURU, who visited different communities in the expansive local government, reports.

Water is often said to be life because of its invaluable role in the existence of every living thing. But, for many communities in Obubra Local Government Area of Cross River State, water does not only give life, it also brings death. The river which serves as their only source of getting water, also kills their members on an annual basis. This is the paradoxical and befuddling situation the people have been grappling with over the years. Should they abandon the river and prevent their people from being killed by it or continue to get water from the river and go on losing their members to it? This is the knotty question the embattled people are yet to find answers to for many decades.

For residents of Oyono, Apiapum, and adjoining communities, the only source of water is the expansive river that separates the state from the neighbouring Ebonyi State.

The state, according to the residents, derived its name from the river as people, before roads were constructed, had to cross the river to neighbouring communities. The entire population depends on the river in which people bathe, wash clothes, motorcycles and to get drinking water. Added to these unhealthy practices that contaminate the water, is the open defecation that takes place by the bank of the river and surrounding hill which ends up in the river, especially during rainy season. Contaminated water and poor sanitation, according to the World Health Organisation (WHO), are linked to the transmission of diseases such as cholera, diarrhoea, dysentery, hepatitis A, typhoid and polio. UNICEF currently rates Nigeria among the five countries contributing to half of the global under-five deaths caused by diarrhoea because of poor access to water,

sanitation and hygiene

The crowd that mills around the river from morning till nightfall tells it all, that the river is the people's saviour because without it, they wouldn't have had anywhere to get any form of water supply for their daily needs.

"This water is our messiah. It saves us from epidemics because without it, we wouldn't have had water to bathe, wash clothes, cook and do other things. If this were the situation, you can imagine the magnitude of environmental crisis we would have in the whole area," a resident said in appreciation of the marvellous uses to which the river is put in the community.

But, the story does not end on that joyful note. Walking side by side with the joy that comes with enjoying regular water supply from the river is the annual sorrow of losing members of the communities, children in particular to the river.

Findings showed that there is hardly a

family in the area that has not had one or more members drowned in the river in the course of going there to fetch water.

Discussions around the havoc that the river unleashes on the people is one thing that Obia Agbor, 50, does not want to engage in. On two occasions, his children who vivaciously went to fetch water from the river for the family, did not return alive. "I have lost two children, a male and a female, to the river and that is how it happens every year. That was a very dark period in my life because I lost my two jewels that I had been struggling to raise. My heart bleeds each time I am made to remember those horrible days that I wished they never existed. There is no year that at least 20 children will not die in the course of fetching water from the river. It is disheartening. No one will see two children die one after the other for just going to fetch water from the river and be happy.

"The unfortunate thing is that we have no control over the situation; even when we lose a child, we don't have any alternative than to send other children to the river to fetch water because that is our only source of getting water. I am not happy with the condition we are living in here. I have travelled widely and known that the situation here is abnormal. In other places, people have one source of water supply or the other."

Another parent, Nwosu Eyami, warmly welcomed our correspondent, who had travelled over a long distance to arrive at his abode to seek his view on the predicament of the people. Within a few minutes of revealing his mission to Eyami's house, his initial friendly mien changed. He looked enraged and paused for a while as if trying to overcome a sudden shock. Within a space of time, he got himself together and retorted: "I lost my first