

## In China, water has revived the village of Ajigen

While the UN reports on the development of the poorest regions of the world, "La Croix" shows concrete progress.

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**In Ajigen, the NGO Initiative Development has installed a water system which provides water to the village (Photo: Manuel Rambaud).**

Strolling among poultry and pigs that circulate in the village, Ms. Hong climbs the steep slope leading to the central square. After filling two large buckets, hanging from each side of a long bamboo stick she carries on her shoulder, she returns to her home below. A journey of a hundred meters.

For this sexagenarian bent by decades of toil in the fields, that effort has almost become a pleasure: "Before, I had to walk two hours up the mountain to fetch water at the source, above the village." A trip she was doing every day, "whether snowing or windy", carrying up to 50 litres of the precious liquid on a rocky trail.

That was before the small revolution in Ajigen in 2005. That year, the hamlet of 300 souls had, for the first time, received running water at its very heart, thanks to a water supply network of 2.5 kilometres installed under the guidance of **Initiative Développement** (ID), a French non-governmental organization (NGO).

### "Producing more than mere survival"

Initiative Développement, which undertakes activities in the areas of health, education and housing in seven countries, has increased access to water and biogas over the past eight years through projects in Guizhou, the poorest province in southern China.

The life of the inhabitants of the village of Ajigen, perched at 2,500 meters in an area of access difficulties, has been changed. "With the time I gain, I can go and cut grass for the pigs, and spend more time in the field," said a villager.

"Our income has improved significantly, from 1,000 Yuan (110 €) to 1250 Yuan (140 €) per year," says Luo Shao Xian, one of the village leaders. "A new access to water opens up prospects for development, that will produce more than mere survival," said Christopher Barron, the Head of Initiative Développement's NGO in China.

### "We do not understand why strangers wanted to help us"

In health terms, the situation has improved significantly. "There is less disease, less diarrhoea," said one man with rotten teeth, dressed in dirty and frayed clothes. Initiative Développement makes a special effort with young people, through the hygiene awareness course, encouraging by example to wash their hands and teeth more often, which was not previously possible.

In the field of sanitation, the recovery of livestock waste can not only reduce contamination of storm-water run-off but also, through the installation of biogas production tanks, provide sufficient energy for lighting and cooking.

Alongside these improvements collective dynamics developed within the small community. Everyone was involved in installing the network. "At first we did not understand why strangers wanted to help us," said a man who, like most people, had "never seen white people."

### **The village to be "virtually autonomous"**

But after a period of mistrust and a year of dialogue with the NGO, the villagers commenced the project. For nine months, "men and women from each of the 72 families participated in the construction of the network installation and the construction of the central tank," says the secretary of the local management committee.

To ensure the functioning of the structure, officials were appointed and charged with monitoring equipment, their maintenance and collection from user's fees of 5 cents per month.

"At first, some would not pay, but after noting the effectiveness of the system, they quickly accepted," says Olivier Lefebvre, the NGO's water and energy engineer in China, and he is pleased that the village is now "virtually autonomous", through transfer of skills.

### **20,000 beneficiaries in 2009**

Today, the reservoir has become the second gathering place for villagers, after the small church where the choir sings beautiful songs for four voices. Under the unique, almost erased, image of Christ, the deacon says that "old people are so grateful for these changes, sometimes they cry."

The former village teacher noted that "the economic transformation of China, much talked about, has not arrived here. Yet now we are happier. "Still, changes in Ajigen have attracted the attention of local authorities, allowing other improvements to be added, such as building a track which opened up the village and building a school funded by a Hong Kong NGO.

In the district of Weining in China, where more than one third of a million people have no direct access to drinking water, this Miao ethnic minority village is no exception. For nearly a decade, Initiative Development projects have multiplied, with the installation of water networks, dozens of rainwater collectors and wells, bringing in 2009 the number of beneficiaries to 20,000.

### **Stopping of Grants**

Such approaches are welcomed in an area where deforestation has exacerbated arid conditions and the scarcity of rainfall is a threat.

During the severe drought earlier this year, tensions also emerged between several villages in the region.

Many sources dried up, and some people sabotaged pipelines of another network located within a few tens of kilometres of Ajigen, suspecting them of "diverting their water," said Christopher Barron.

While facing these urgent needs, Initiative Development received the National China Energy Globe Award in 2009, a prize awarded for its actions to provide access to water in Guizhou, and at the same time suffered removal of water subsidies, even though the success of Ajigen begs to be extended to other villages.

### **Sylvain DULAC at Ajigen (Guizhou, China)**

Translated from French by Mark Baker

Source:

<http://www.la-croix.com/En-Chine-l-eau-a-redonne-vie-au-village-d-Ajigen/article/2439903/4077>