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### A Haitian mother struggles to provide her family with safe water

Amid cholera threat, poverty is an obstacle to safe-water access



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Igenice Merceda takes her son Godson Noel, 2, home from the medical centre in L'Estère, a town in Haiti's Artibonite

Department.

**By Benjamin Steinlechner**

L'ESTERE, Haiti, 9 November 2010 – It is late morning in L'Estere, a small community in Haiti's Artibonite region, north of the nation's capital of Port-au-Prince. Igenice Merceda has arrived at the community hospital. She's happy because today she will be taking home her son Godson Noel. Only yesterday, Igenice wasn't sure if her son's three siblings would ever see him alive again.

Godson Noel is sitting on his bed holding tightly to his uncle, who stayed with him while his mother cared for his three siblings.

When Godson Noel and his mother arrive at their home, the boy's three siblings are eagerly waiting. The home is a small shack fashioned from clay. The little single room has only one bed. It takes up most of the room. Ms. Merceda buys her water at the neighbouring well for the equivalent of 50 cents a gallon. The water is untreated.

Poverty worsens situation

"I never treated the water," she says. "But at the hospital they told me to treat with chlorine before using it. I'm really scared. My young son was sick with cholera. This could have happened to my other children as well."

In a country where more than 50 per cent of the population lives on less than \$1.25 per day, however, money for soap or fuel to boil water is not always an option for the majority of the population.

Ms. Merceda, for one, could not afford to regularly buy chlorine tablets to treat the water she and her children drink. She says that if it comes to deciding whether to have food on the table or to have safe drinking water, food would take priority.



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A girl collects water from the Artibonite River in Grand Dessaline, a town in Artibonite Department, Haiti. The river is believed to be contaminated with cholera.

Regular supplies of chlorine tablets to purify water are not available in community markets. As part of its cholera response activities, UNICEF has been facilitating the distribution of chlorine tablets, also known as Aquatabs. To date, UNICEF has provided almost 1 million tablets, each capable of treating five litres of water, to communities in cholera-affected areas of Haiti. Another 100 million have been ordered.

Aware of the danger

Celeste Jameson, a neighbour of the family, says the option of boiling water to make it safe is also not always available.

"Most of the people in this neighbourhood don't have the money for charcoal," he says. "And if they have it, they will use it to cook food and not to boil water."

Having safe drinking water is made even more difficult in Ms. Merceda's household, because the family does not have access to a sanitary toilet. Like their neighbours, the family relieves themselves in a small local stream, the same place they use to wash themselves.

"It's very hard for me," she says. "My husband is a farmer. He doesn't earn much money and I don't have a job. I do tell my children to wash their hands after going to the toilet. But I can't control them all the time. Soap is expensive, too."

Still, Ms. Merceda is aware of the danger posed by unclean water. She says she will try to use chlorine tablets to keep the water safe or at least boil the water before using it.

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