

Clean water in Kenya is a rare luxury

May 11, 2006. 10:23 AM

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Each day begins with a three-hour hunt for water.

On this summer day in Kenya's Masai Mara, we decide to accompany Layla. She is one of the 1.1 billion people without sustainable access to clean water. Layla straps her seven-month-old baby to her back and sets off into the mountains.

The river is only two kilometres away, but the water is dirty and gives her three children diarrhea, so she sets off for the cleaner spring. She can't always get spring water, she tells us in Swahili. It depends on the season. If crops need planting or harvesting, she has no time to go the extra distance — another five kilometres past the river. It also depends on how lucky she is on her daily search for firewood, which is becoming scarcer.

Her husband does not help. Period.

We ask Layla why, although we already know the answer. Like millions of other uneducated men in rural Africa, he follows defined gender stereotypes. He usually sits around all day at his regular spot under a large, shaded tree with the other men, seemingly waiting for something or someone important. Not much transpires as the hours go by, other than maybe finding a new stick to wave as a prop to show the force of his opinion during a heated conversation about local politics.

She says he is faithful "at least," a necessity here as HIV/AIDS is rampant in the country, with one in 26 infected.

As we walk the dusty route, we are especially careful of the acacia thorns, which litter the path in the more wooded areas closer to the river. Often more than an inch long, acacia thorns are hard to remove once the tip becomes embedded in the skin.

Drought has hit this region badly. The skin of Layla's feet are cracked and calloused, despite ingenious sandals made from used tires.

We pass the river on the way. Half a dozen women are collecting water or washing clothes. A handful of children are playing by the river bank. A couple of men bathe in the distance.

Two large industrial farms grow wheat and soy beans about 30 kilometres upstream towards the tarmac road that connects these villages to the outside world. The river is used as a source of irrigation for the farms and is a convenient runoff for the chemicals. Crop dusting planes spray the plants during growing season to prevent insects from destroying the yield.

We keep walking, having to stop three times to sip water from the bottles we brought with us. It is already 27 degrees and it is only 8 a.m. Layla refuses our offers of water. We make it to the spring to find the water is not flowing freely today. The drought has made it worse. Each woman — there are about eight lined up — spends five minutes filling up their water containers. Some carry a large tin jug like Layla; others carry heavy



Sudanese refugee women carry water Friday, Aug. 6, 2004 in the Touloum refugee camp in eastern Chad.

plastic jerricans. The waiting women chat away, complaining about the lack of water, laughing about their husbands and gossiping.

Once Layla fills her jug, she takes out a foot-long scarf, swiftly winding the fabric and then placing it on her head in one easy movement. The jug goes on top.

Now, the long journey home begins. The water is very heavy; we can see her perspiring as she struggles to carry it, with the baby on her back.

We offer to help, each of us taking a turn. But we don't carry it on our heads because of the realistic concern it might topple off, wasting a day's work. Instead, we hold the jug in front, using both arms.

We never make it more than 60 paces or so without needing a break. She gently laughs at our ineptitude.

Back at the boma, she starts a fire and then uses the water to make a maize meal to give to her children. The rest will be used for cooking and drinking.

Tomorrow, she will begin the journey all over again.

Meanwhile, we begin our journey back to Canada. When we arrive at the Toronto airport, we are parched from the long flight. A mountain of bottled water awaits us in the food court and in vending machines. Water imported from the French Alps. Water from the Canadian Rockies. Water with bubbles. Water without bubbles. Water with vitamins added. Regular tap water, which has been "purified three times." Sports top. Twist top. Regular top.

Most bottles cost about \$3: Layla's income for three days.

Several tables in the food court are littered with half-consumed water bottles, all left for the garbage. Nearby there is an untouched drinking fountain, where as much clean drinking water as we want can be consumed for free.

Our world will spend \$35 billion dollars on bottled water this year. It will only cost approximately \$11 billion a year to achieve the United Nations Millennium Development Goal of cutting in half the number of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water, according to UNICEF.

These are the economics of water.

Layla's the one paying the price.