

Words by **Tony Stokes**

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Water, dignity, and hope in Ethiopia

Recently, a small team of four Rotarians and one Rotaractor travelled from Melbourne to Addis Ababa with our partner, International Needs Australia (INA), to visit water and sanitation projects in central Ethiopia.

Addis Ababa is a busy and vibrant capital. But it was what we saw beyond the city limits that left a lasting impression.

As we journeyed deeper into rural communities in central Ethiopia, the contrast with daily life in Australia became stark. Families collected water from muddy creeks or shallow pools, or carried it long distances from distant bores, usually by mule.

Schools were overcrowded, classrooms rundown. Many had no toilets at all. Where toilets existed, they were usually unsafe and unusable. Students went all day without water to drink. Girls, in particular, frequently stayed home.

In many households, sanitation meant a hole dug in the yard. Open defecation remained common. For millions, this is everyday life. And yet, alongside the need, we saw hope.

We visited schools with new classrooms and proper, segregated toilet blocks. We met families proudly showing us safe household latrines. We saw community water points delivering clean water.

In many of these places, Rotary and Operation Toilets (now known as “We Can’t Wait”) — had played a role.

The mission is simple: access to safe water, sanitation and hygiene cannot be delayed. Working with Rotary clubs, NGOs and local communities, We Can’t Wait helps build infrastructure and delivers hygiene education.

The impact is especially profound for girls — improving health, restoring dignity and keeping them in school longer.

A practical example is Project EWASH, delivered in partnership with INA and local Ethiopian organisation BBBC and supported by a RAWCS project. Under this three-year program, toilet blocks in six primary schools and latrines in more than sixty household latrines, are being built. Teachers, health workers and community leaders are trained using a Community-Led Total Sanitation and Hygiene approach — ensuring communities identify their needs, contribute to the work and take ownership of the outcomes.





Rotary's contribution is matched at least 1:1 through INA's Australian Government accreditation, effectively doubling the impact.

Why Ethiopia? Rapid population growth, widespread poverty and limited infrastructure place enormous strain on communities. Foreign aid is declining, yet the needs remain pressing.

But statistics are not the real reason we do this work. The real reason is the people, especially the children.

We met children brimming with excitement and gratitude — thrilled simply to attend school safely. We met householders proud to own a proper toilet for the first time. One family told us they had once felt ashamed; now they happily invite neighbours to visit.

Community groups expressed deep appreciation — not just for infrastructure, but for being heard.

One meeting with a village water committee revealed a diesel-powered pump sitting idle because fuel had become unaffordable. Families had returned to unsafe water sources. On hearing this, five Rotary clubs quickly united to fund its conversion to affordable electric power — a solution now underway. Rotary in Action!

**Change is visible. Progress is real.
But the journey is far from over.**

Because when it comes to safe water and sanitation, We Can't Wait

