

# CALABASH CISTERN MANUAL 2024

SAMBASABA



€ 280,-  
for 5000 L.  
\*Page 8



## Foreword Hans Hartung M.Sc

Hans Hartung is an independent water and energy consultant with more than 30 years' experience in the sector. He is associated to FAKT (Stuttgart, Germany) and is a former vice-president of IRC-SA (International Rainwater Catchment Systems Association)

Dear reader,

**Here you have a simple, low cost and sturdy tank or cistern. Get yourself engaged in spreading the cistern! Many ideas are possible: building the cisterns yourself after you got training, get trainers trained, finance the training of trainers and/or the materials for the cisterns, spread the idea and distribute this booklet. You can be assured that: many people benefitting from rainwater of the cisterns will be grateful to you!**

Congratulations to Paul Akkerman,  
Congratulations to Sadjaliu Djalo, Julio Nahonta and all the other trainers and masons in Guinea Bissau!

Your work, as I have seen it, is truly impressive. The speed

of scaling up rainwater harvesting in Guinea Bissau especially (and other countries as well) is impressive. And you have done this without big international or national backing. It shows how the approach and the technology is valued by the people in need of clean water.

The impressive thing is not only the numbers of rainwater cisterns built and used, but also the constant improvement of the cisterns. They are made simpler to construct and sturdier. The new Cistern Calabash is the optimised cistern incorporating a long experience.

**It deserves to be spread to countries in Africa and beyond in big numbers!**



Hans Hartung



Han Heijnen

## Foreword Han Heijnen M.Sc

Han Heijnen is Vice President (external relations) of IRCSA (International Rainwater Catchment Systems Association) and President of IRHA (International Rainwater Harvesting Alliance)

Dear reader

**This manual describes in detail the construction of the Cistern Calabash.** In doing so, it shares the experience of developing a good design with all who want to copy the cistern in their own locality. There are many parts of Africa and the wider world that can benefit from the Calabash experience. The readiness of the project team to provide training to interested colleagues will create further capacity to apply this technique.

De Gevulde Waterkruik - Clean Water-Healthy Village - project team has shown that rainwater harvesting is a viable and appreciated source of water in the islands and coastal areas of Guinea-Bissau. During the last decade a team of local artisans has developed and refined their skills in constructing reservoirs that are sturdy, based on local solutions and – with a little support - affordable for a household.

Rainwater that is collected from a clean surface will further improve during storage. Bacterial die-off in the cistern can be substantial while bio-films developing at the cistern-water interface are also considered to have a positive effect on the water quality. Thus, a well-managed cistern should only be cleaned every 3-4 years. (More information about water quality and treatment further in the Manual). Safely collected rainwater provides good quality water for drinking and cooking. It is a source of enjoyment and health. Use it well!

**I wholeheartedly recommend the Guinea-Bissau team for promoting Rain Water Harvesting as a component of the Clean Water – Healthy Village Project.**

**Good luck for all rainwater harvesting practitioners in using this inspiring manual!**

### Author of the MANUAL:

Paul Akkerman B.Sc, projectleader CLEAN WATER - HEALTHY VILLAGE,  
Netherlands / Guinea-Bissau

Reprint 03-2024





**Calabash Cistern  
to store drinking water  
for households**

**To construct  
the Calabash of 5000 litre  
in ferro cement,**

**you need:**

6 days

9 bags of cement,

10 kg soft steelwire

8 m chicken mesh

a tap





## Dear Friends and Practitioners of Rain Water Harvesting

My friend Bicosse Nandafa and I started the work in his village Bedanda, because many families are in urgent need of safe drinking water. That was in 2005. Today Bedanda and many other villages in Guinea-Bissau can manage their water stress. Our work continues in many Sub-Saharan villages.

**In this manual we hand over our experience to you,** because thousands of families with children in many African countries suffer from water related diseases and are in need of clean water. A big need of practical training and friendship over the world can be fulfilled.

This booklet is also meant as a guide to thousands of small African farmers, working hard to survive with little help from governments. It is an ode to all supporters who believe in our work.

TRAINING: our organisation CLEAN WATER - HEALTHY VILLAGE has several years of experience in training masons and managers of projects in DR Congo, Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Guinea-Conakry, Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, Mozambique, Cameroon, Madagascar, Mexico and Sri-Lanka (see map below).

The GOAL of our project is within the Sustainable Development Goals of UN, SDG 6: **“Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”**

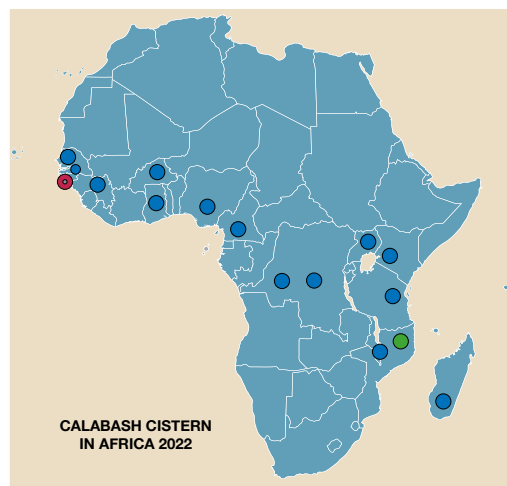
Thank you,  
Paul Akkerman

**More information:** [www.degevuldewaterkruik.nl](http://www.degevuldewaterkruik.nl)  
[www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com](http://www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com)

March 2024

2005

2024



Paul Akkerman is an independent consultant and has been working with farmers in Guinea-Bissau for 30 years. Since 2005 he has been adapting rain water harvesting as an important source of drinking water for the population. He has initiated the construction of more than 4000 domestic rainwater cisterns in the country. Now he is spreading the technology to other African countries by means of training.



## BASIC MATERIALS: Clay blocks for the mould Cement and sand for the cistern



Result of polluted sand

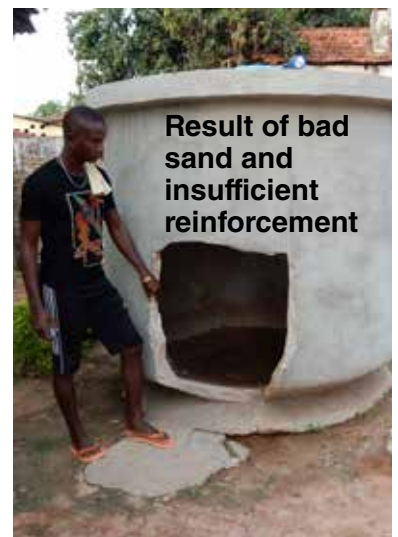


Cement blocks can be used, when clay blocks are not available.

Above: normal clay blocks ( $\pm 40 \times 20 \times 17$  cm) can be used for the mould. They are of the same size as the blocks that are used for the construction of houses. Below: Mortar is a mixture 1 : 3 of cement with clean sand. A proper mix is essential in order to get a **watertight cistern**.



50 kg of cement needs 2 partly filled wheelbarrow with sand, for the right mixtrure!

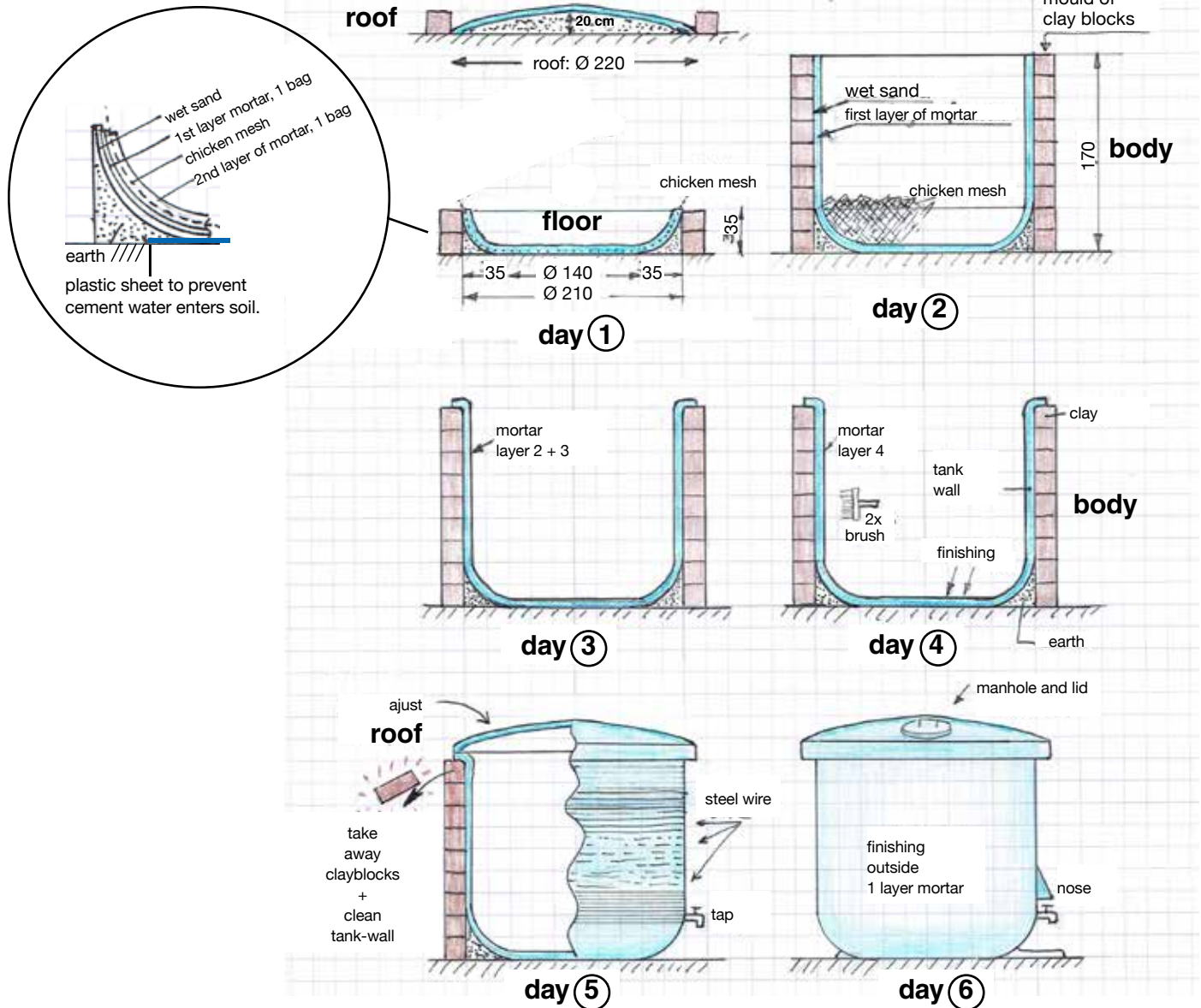


Result of bad sand and insufficient reinforcement





## CONSTRUCTION SEQUENCE



**The construction system of our cisterns is based on a mould of clay blocks.**

The cement cistern is constructed inside this mould ① and ②. At the final stage of the construction process ⑤ the masons remove the clay blocks of the mould. The blocks can be used several times. The clay blocks are commonly used in many African countries for the construction of houses. In other parts of the world cement blocks can be used.

# INFORMATION

**The Calabash Cistern** is developed in West Africa. It can store rainwater that can be used as safe drinking water for families. The local name of our project is: **IAGU LIMPO – TABANKA SAN**, it means **CLEAN WATER – HEALTHY VILLAGE**.

This manual shows our practical knowledge. Together we have constructed more than 7000 water cisterns during our 18 years of existence. Every year we train masons and managers from other countries.

## Materials to be bought for one cistern

- 9 bags (50 kg) of cement
- 10 kg of soft steel wire
- 9 m. of chicken mesh (1 m. wide)
- 8 m. of plastic sheet (2m. wide) to protect the wet cement (this sheet can be reused!)
- Tap, 2 sockets, pvc tube and teflontape (see page 27)
- One 50 cm steel bar D6 or D8 for the handle of the lid

## Materials to be provided by the cistern owner

- 200 clay blocks (+/- 17 x 20 x 40 cm) for the mould
- 22 wheelbarrows with sand for the mortar. Take care that the sand has a good grain size and it is not polluted with clay or salt. The projectleader has to control the sand!
- 600 l. water for the mortar

## Tools

- 1 wheelbarrow
- 3 shovels, 3 trowels
- 3 cement plates (masonry float)
- 1 bucket and 1 basin ø40
- 1 tape measure of 3 m.
- 1 levelling tool / spiritlevel
- 1 pincer to cut the steel wire
- 1 hoe
- 1 machete or chopper knife
- 2 brushes for the cement water
- 1 steal brush
- 1 ladder, to enter the inside of the cistern and mould, can be home made.

Guinea-Bissau



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## Partitioning of costs in Guinea-Bissau

Material:	€ 172	61 %
Tools:	€ 10	4 %
Transport:	€ 15	5 %
labour:	€ 63	22 %
coordination:	€ 20	8 %
	€ 280	100 %

## The total cost of a 5.000 L Cistern

In many African countries the total cost is about € 280,00.

Exception: In DR Congo the total cost is about € 440,00.

€ 560,00 for a 10.000 liter cistern (Guinea-Bissau)

More information on [www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com](http://www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com)





Hand tools only





diameter outer circle: 210 cm  
diameter inner circle: 130 / 140 cm

A strong wellshaped floor is essential for the construction. Page 10 - 15





Above:  
adjust the clay blocks in the upright position.



Making of the mould in wet sand in a hollow shape.  
The shape is for the globe-like bottom. (See page 14).







Above: Shape by hand a regular hollow curved surface in the sand, it will give an attractive and strong body to the cistern. (page 14). The mortar lies on the wet sand or plastic sheet to prevent drying out. The construction of the roof starts the first day because it has to be strong to be lifted on day 5/6. Page 14/15.







The construction of the floor is done in **3 layers**: ① mortar (first bag of cement) ② chicken mesh ③ mortar (second bag). Also see page 18.







Wet paper of cement bag

The construction of the roof. Above: the dome shaped roof is at least 20 centimeters high in the middle. Below: use a tub to shape the manhole of  $D \geq 40$  cm.

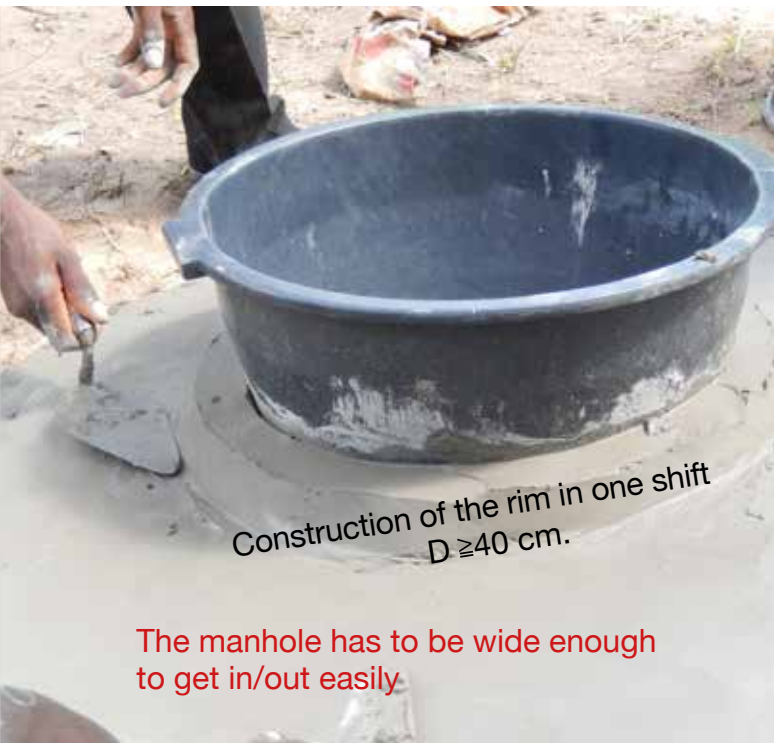


Twisting of  
steelwire 5x  
for the circles,  
page 15





Above: the roof is reinforced with 4 circles of twisted steel wire of binding wire.  
Below: the construction of the manhole.

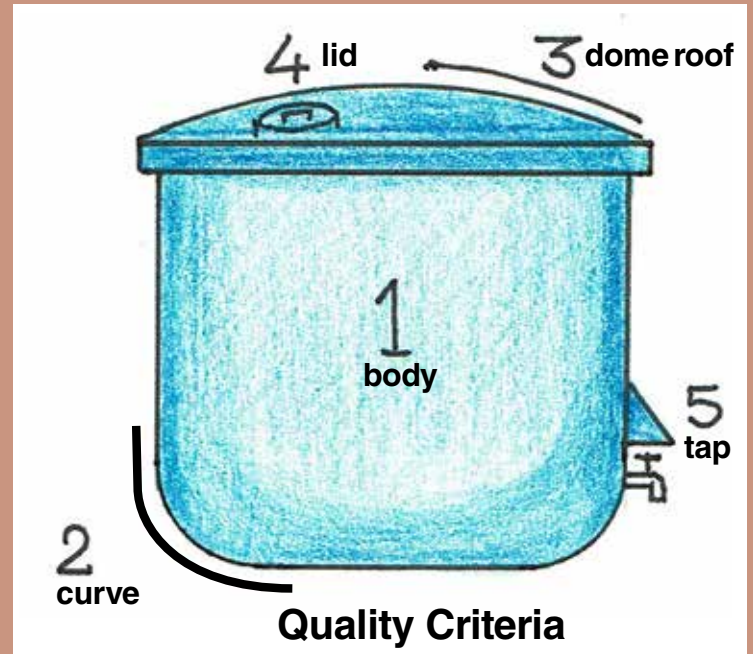


The manhole has to be wide enough  
to get in/out easily





Good connection between the floor and the wall is very important for the strength and the water tightness of the cistern. When the shape is like a globe, like a football, stresses are evenly spread in the curved section and less chance of cracks. Ever seen a football with cracks?? **No cracks no leaks!!**







Above: Always wet the surface before the new plaster of cement is applied. It creates a good bonding between the two layers of plaster.

Use plastic sheet for covering the fresh cement in order to avoid sun or dry air! Cement loves water and shadow!!!!

Moreover: it is essential that the cement should not dry out and become brittle. Water is necessary to harden the cement, hardening is **not** a drying procedure. Water cisterns constructed in the moist rainy season have the best quality. No need for maintenance.

When the cistern is finished the cement needs to stay **moist** and be wetted and covered with plastic for 10 days.

Fill the cistern with water the **first day** it is finished up to the level of the tap!!

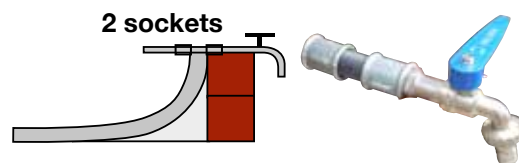
"Mr. Mason, fill it yourself and do not wait for the cistern owner!"







Applying chickenmesh: just bend the chickenmesh outside over the 2nd row of blocks, instead of bending inside. You get far better control!



Install the tube and 2 sockets for the tap in the wet cement on the first day. (see also page 27)





Bend the chickenmesh over the blocks and pile the next row of blocks upon it







Above: construct the mould with clay blocks in + 9 rows to reach a height of 1.70 m. Below: apply 1 layer of clean wet sand for a smooth inside surface of the mould. Use a spirit level to make a vertical wall.



Construction of the wall during day 2, 3 and 4



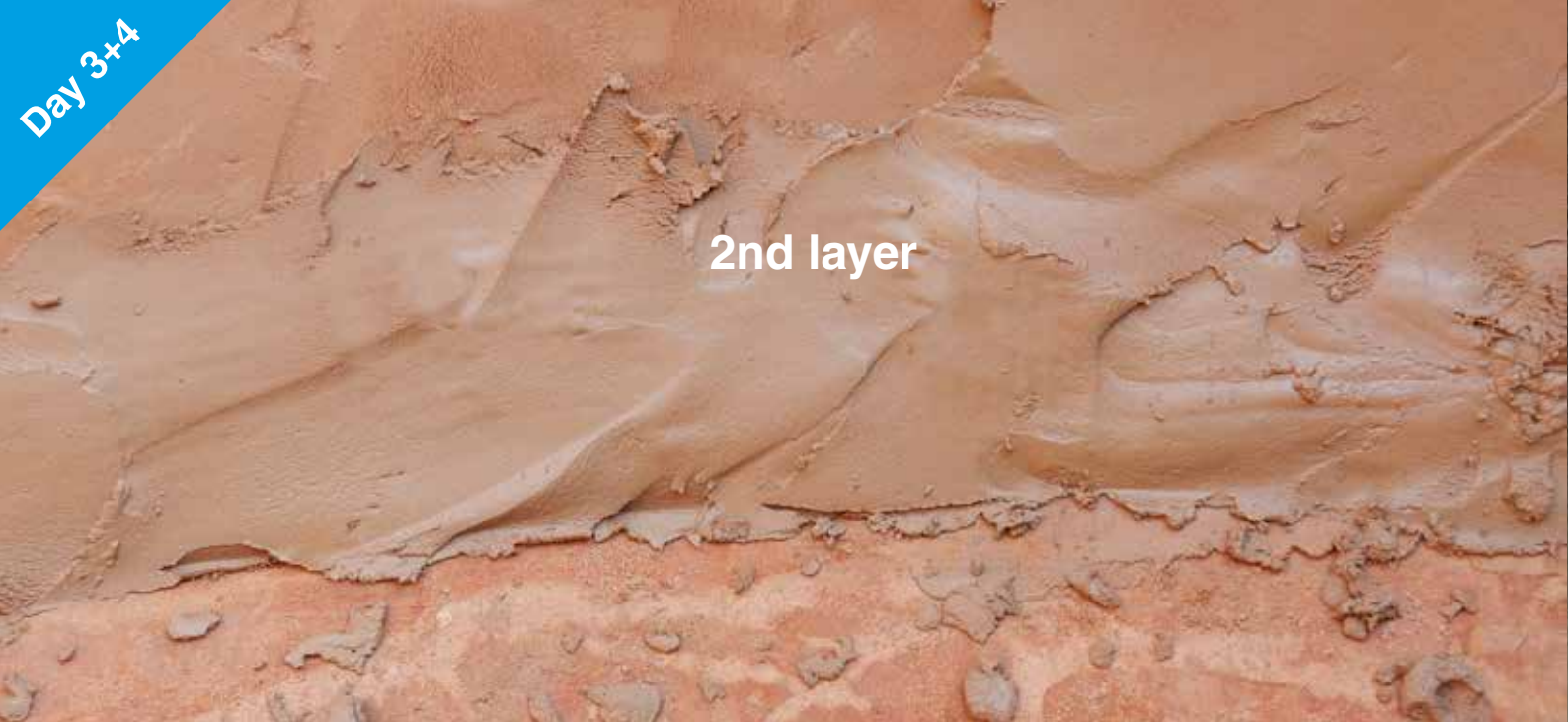


Above: mortar on wet sand. The mortar is curved over the edge of the mould.  
Below: apply a total of 4 layers of mortar during day 2, 3 and 4.



Check the thickness of the plaster with a stick.





2nd layer

**Below and right:** use a mixture of water and pure cement and apply this with a brush on **every layer** of mortar. **This makes the wall water tight!**



Brush

3rd layer



Levelling tool

4th layer





Finishing the floor,  
the bed for the water





After the roof has hardened for 4 days you can lift it and carefully adjust it onto the wall of the cistern. Make sure it is strong enough. It is a heavy job and it can be dangerous. Make sure that the team is strong and coordinated. Two persons support the roof from the **inside** of the cistern while lifting it step by step over the cistern wall to make sure not to damage it!







**The big thing!** Remove the blocks of the mould and store them away to be used once more!

**And:** clean the sand from the wall of the new Calabash with a shovel and a steel brush.







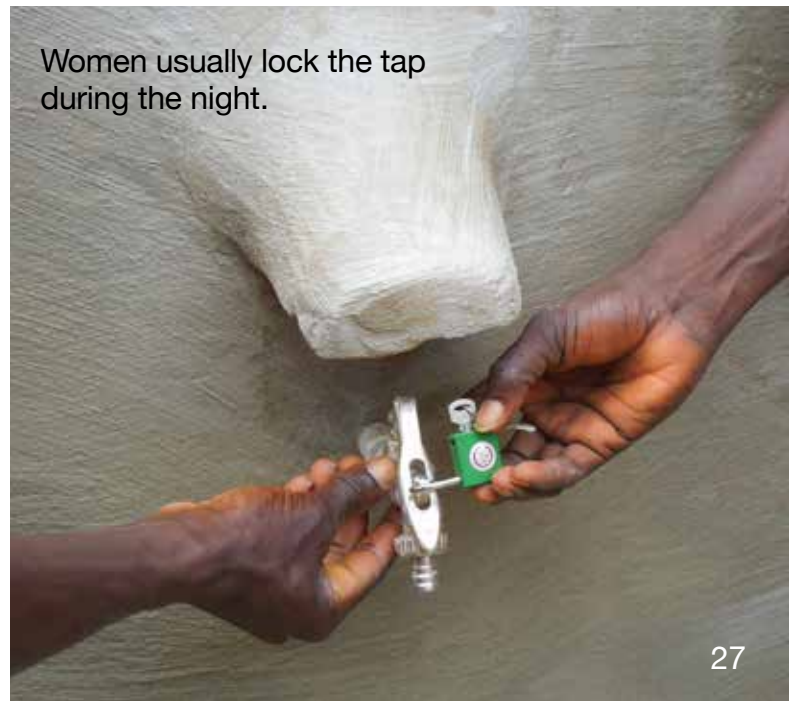
We use steel wire (binding wire) for reinforcement of the cistern wall. Steel wire is good for the cylindrical wall and much cheaper than chicken mesh. Wind the steel wire around the cistern from below upwards, like a spiral. Start as low as possible to overlap the chicken mesh from the bottom. At least 10 cm overlap. In the lower half, the distance between the wires is 1 cm. More upwards, above 0,8 m the distance can be max 2 cm. The binding wire can be bought in coils of 10 kg. Plaster the wired wall with the last layer of mortar. (layer no 5)







Use a piece of PVC tube (or GI tube) with screw thread and 2 sockets to prevent leaking. A part of the first socket has to stick out of the wall to have grip for a tube-wrench when changing the tap. Use a tap which can be locked during the night. Think of the teflon tape.



Women usually lock the tap during the night.





The nose is meant to prevent people from stepping on the tap. People like to step on the tap to reach the roof of the cistern. As the roof is often used as a safe place for laundry, solar panels and dry food.  
**Below:** Plaster the gap between the roof and the wall **both outside and inside**.







A small lid within the bigger lid. The small lid covers the small opening to let the rainwater in. It is easy to open and easy to close when there is no rain. The bigger and heavier lid is used for opening and closing the manhole. Only once in a few years it is used when someone enters the cistern for cleaning or repairing. The lid needs to fit securely in the manhole to keep sunlight, dust and insects out. See also page 33.



Don't forget the small rim







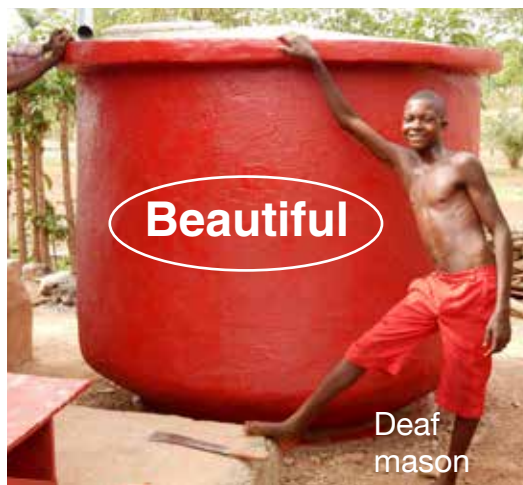
Carve in the wet cement our symbol, the year of construction (inscription), the name of the village and a number. This can never fade out. It is for administration and control.



Finishing touch:







Deaf mason

More pressure



Cistern of 10.000 L at a school



Medium Calabash for the kitchen

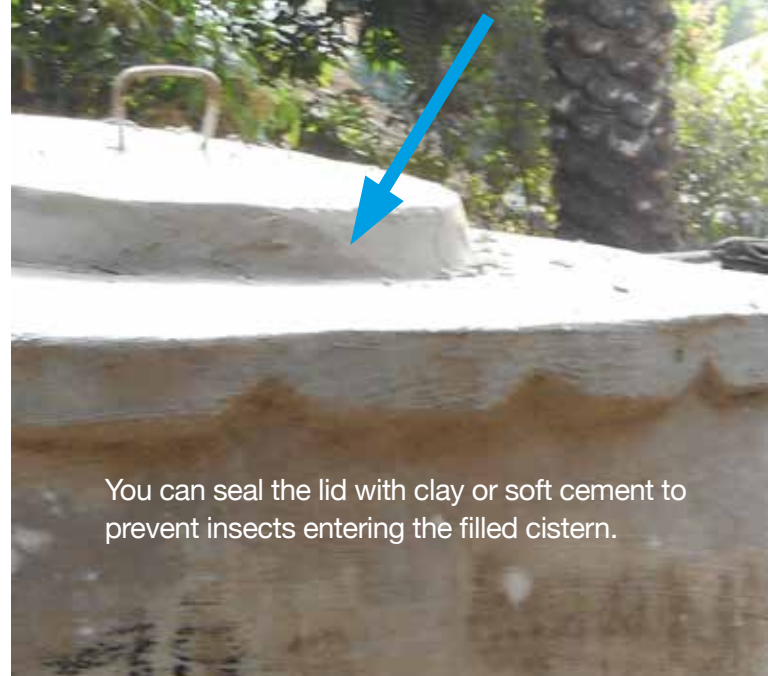
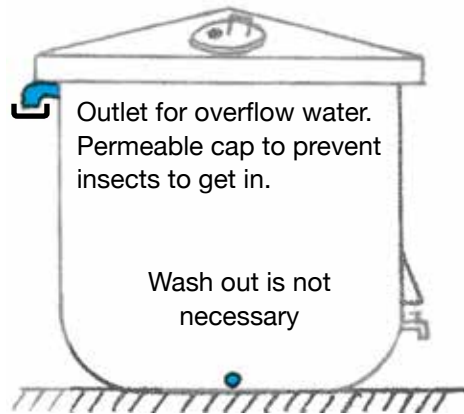


## How to catch the rain





## Options



Always repair leaks and cracks from the inside! The cistern must be empty of water. Enter the cistern and clean the surface with a steel brush, make the surface carefully rough with a chisel and hammer and make it wet, so that the new plaster can have a good bonding to the wall. Big cracks will need a piece of chicken mesh. Use a cement, sand and water mixture that has a good consistency and is not too wet. Keep the repair moist for one week, using sacking or a piece of cloth that is regularly wetted.



# Water Quality

## Remarks by Han Heijnen

- The Guidelines for drinking-water quality: small water supplies, and package 6: 'Rainwater collection and storage' of the accompanying Sanitary inspection packages, published by the World Health Organization in February 2024, recognize that a well-designed rainwater harvesting system with clean catchments, covered storage cisterns and point-of-use treatment - as appropriate - offers drinking water with very low health risks. [https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/water-sanitation-and-health-\(wash\)/water-safety-and-quality/water-safety-planning/rainwater-collection-and-storage](https://www.who.int/teams/environment-climate-change-and-health/water-sanitation-and-health-(wash)/water-safety-and-quality/water-safety-planning/rainwater-collection-and-storage)
- Domestic rainwater harvesting systems really make a difference, in dry zone areas, in places where water is saline or contaminated with fluorides or other harmful chemicals, or to enjoy a better service,
- The use of a first flush device or an inlet filter provides a way to separate dirt from good rainwater. First flush means that the first rainfall after the dry season on a dusty dirty roof, is not collected in the cistern. But it can certainly be used for watering plants
- Rainwater that is collected from a clean surface will further improve during dark storage. Bacterial die-off in the cistern can be substantial while bio-films developing at the cistern-water interface are also considered to have a positive effect on the water quality.
- Thus, to benefit from the bio-film effect it is better to clean the cistern only every 3-4 years.
- Point-of-use treatment of water for drinking purposes should be considered (filtration, chlorination, boiling, SODIS etc.).
- Mosquito breeding in the cistern needs to be avoided by ensuring that all entry points are closed and vents are fitted with mosquito gauze.

## Observations by Hans Hartung

- The rainwater cisterns are an integral part of life in the families. People appreciate them very much as a source of clean water for drinking, whereas water for other purposes (such as cleaning, washing) is usually coming from wells (there the quality maybe a bit salty)
- Water from cisterns is especially valued at the end of the dry season (starting from February) when many wells dry up or have very little water.
- Water from the cisterns is not the only source of water but an additional source, as people use different water sources for different water needs at different times of the year. Rainwater is especially liked for its good taste, its purity and its availability at the house (in the cistern)
- Contrary to many beliefs, people collect water from (mostly) thatched roofs in a traditional way (binding the ends of the thatch together), collecting it in available vessels and then storing it in the cistern. The brown colour disappears during the storage as well as bacterial count goes down significantly (as evidenced by our own earlier tests.
- Jane Heyworth studied a sample of 1000 school children living in South Australia who were regularly drinking rainwater. They were at no greater odds of gastroenteritis than children from the capital, Adelaide, who drank treated public mains water).





Trained masons receive their certificates in Guinea-Bissau.



Mini Calabash at the school for children to wash their hands to protect their health.

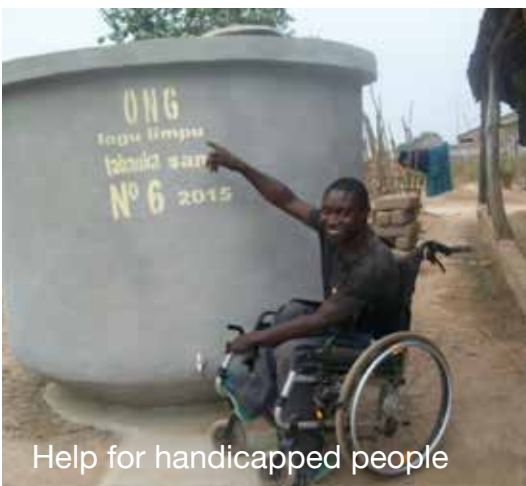


## WOMEN OF AFRICA NEED PEACE AND CLEAN WATER

Availability of clean water supply contributes to the empowerment of women.



# More possibilities More countries



Help for handicapped people



Water for irrigation



Trainingscenter Kenya



Guinee - Conakry



Madagascar



Nigeria



Congo



## Comparison of Ferrocement cistern versus PVC cistern van 5000 litre

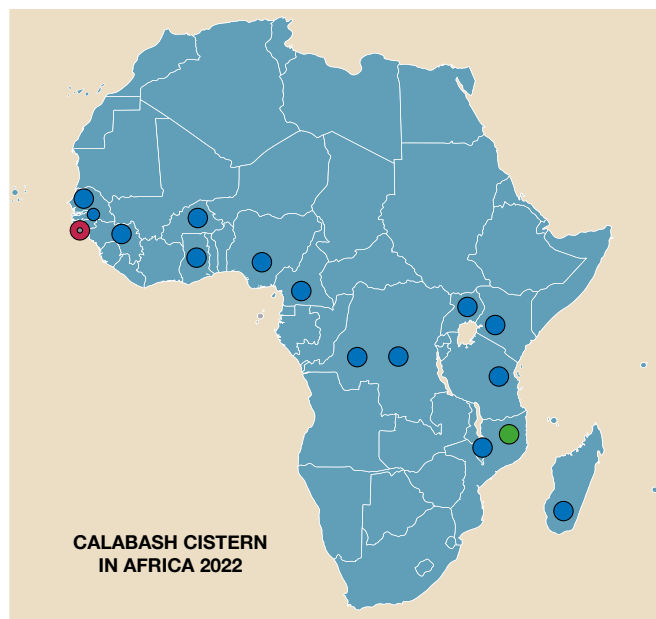


	Indicators	Cistern van ferrocement	PVC tank
1	Costs	€ 250, 00 for a 5000 l. cistern. in e.g. Guinee, Senegal, Nigeria, Tanzania. Labour and transport included	€ 500, 00 up to € 1000, 00 for 5000 L.
2	Construction timespan	Construction on location in 6 days. When finished, the fresh cement has to be kept moist for at least one week.	Ready from the factory. Installation in a few hours when foundation has been prepared.
3	Water quality	Water stays cool in cement cistern.	Water becomes warm in black plastic tank.
4	Impact on the health of families	Research indicates that water stored in cisterns that are dark inside, decrease the incidence of water related diseases.	Same results.
5	Repairable	Yes! Leaks can be repaired by carefully cutting away the damaged area and plastering at the inside.	Difficult or impossible to repair.
6	Lifespan	More than 25 years, as experienced in Nepal and Sri Lanka	5 to 10 years, depending of UV-erosion
7	Transport	Flexible. The transport of cement in bags and tools is possible by wheelbarrow, canoe, donkey cart, motorbike, car, etc.	With a lorry, only on proper roads.
8	Control of technology. Autonomy.	Development of local knowhow by training of local masons, craftsmen and managers. Local knowhow is essential for maintenance and repair in the long run and for independent replication.	Knowhow stays in the companies, away from the community.
9	Economical impact	Materials and tools can usually be bought at local markets. It supports the local traders.	Materials for PVC and equipment is bought by large companies. Villagers do not benefit.
10	Income generation	Local masons, technicians, trainers, small shops, etc. everyone can earn.	Incomes concentrated in the hands of a few companies.
11	Water management, autarkic self-support	Families having drinking water in stock feel responsible for the water management of their households.	Same.
12	Social impact	Empowerment of social cooperation within a village. It can reduce costs.	Less impact
13	Weight of cistern/tank	About 1600 kg	100 to 200 kg



# Further reading on Rain Water Harvesting

- Gleason Espíndola, J. A., Casiano Flores, Augusto César Pacheco-Vega, R., & Pacheco Montes, M. R. (2020). **International Rainwater Catchment Systems Experiences** (J. A. G. Espíndola, C. A. C. Flores, R. Pacheco-Vega, & M. R. P. Montes (eds.). **IWA Publishing**. <https://doi.org/10.2166/9781789060584>
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## Cistern Calabash spread over Africa

- Project in action
- Project in preparation
- Guinea-Bissau

[www.degevuldewaterkruik.nl](http://www.degevuldewaterkruik.nl)

[www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com](http://www.cleanwaterhealthyvillage.com)

# CLEAN WATER - HEALTHY VILLAGE



Sadjaliu Djalo,  
coordinator advisor



Julio Nahonta,  
coordinator islands



Domingos Tchuda  
coordinator Oio



Alfred Tobiko  
project leader Kenya



Paul Akkerman  
Coördinator  
The Netherlands

**We are prepared to train your trainers and project leaders.  
We like to meet new leaders in different African countries.**

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Iaia Indjai, assistant



Amadu Djau



Benson Siokino, Kenya



Benard Oloisa, Kenya



Evalyne Kimojino, Kenya



Bicarande Na Nsosa



Curé Na Bak



Júlio Nhambe



Binhate Na Nchongo



Obinna Abachi, Nigeria

**Trainers of masons**



# CLEAN WATER

-

# HEALTHY VILLAGES HEALTHY FAMILIES



## EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN

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