



# TURNING ON THE TAP IN XONCA, GUATEMALA

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## Waiting for Water

The community of Xonca is nestled in the valleys of north-western Guatemala in the Quiché region. Its mountainous and foggy, pine-forested slopes are home to a predominantly Indigenous population. Families celebrate their culture through intricately woven clothing, love of traditional music, spicy foods laden with chilies, and a distinct language—Ixil.

When the community of Xonca was first established, they never imagined it would grow so fast, or so big. As it expanded from one district to two, then three

and four, the water spring they'd bought to support just 15 households wasn't nearly enough. One district's households were never even connected to the spring. For years, they were forced to walk to communal water sources in neighbouring communities and hand-carry their water home. This consumed hours every day and was physically exhausting—water is heavy! In addition, collecting, transporting, and storing all their water in various open containers increased opportunities for it to become contaminated with parasites that lead to sickness.

We all need access to water for drinking, cooking, hygiene, and sanitation. Imagine not being able to wash your clothes, your dishes, or your hands? Without enough water, families in Xonca often suffered recurring illnesses from intestinal parasites and various skin diseases. When their drinking water was contaminated by animal waste, run-off debris, or breeding larvae, it was impossible to stay healthy.

Xonca community leaders strove to bring water to their people. They contacted several charities to ask for support, but every time, they were turned down. The vast scope and expense of the project was too much, they were told. They also appealed to their local municipality for help. But the mayor always said no.

## The Power of Partnership

Xonca began a partnership with Food for the Hungry (FH) in 2009. From the beginning, Vernon Alliance Church (VAC) in British Columbia walked with the families of Xonca through prayers, financial gifts, community visits, child sponsorships, and special projects. Knowing their pressing need for water, VAC was ready to be the ones to say "Yes!" and help make clean water at home a reality for every family in Xonca.

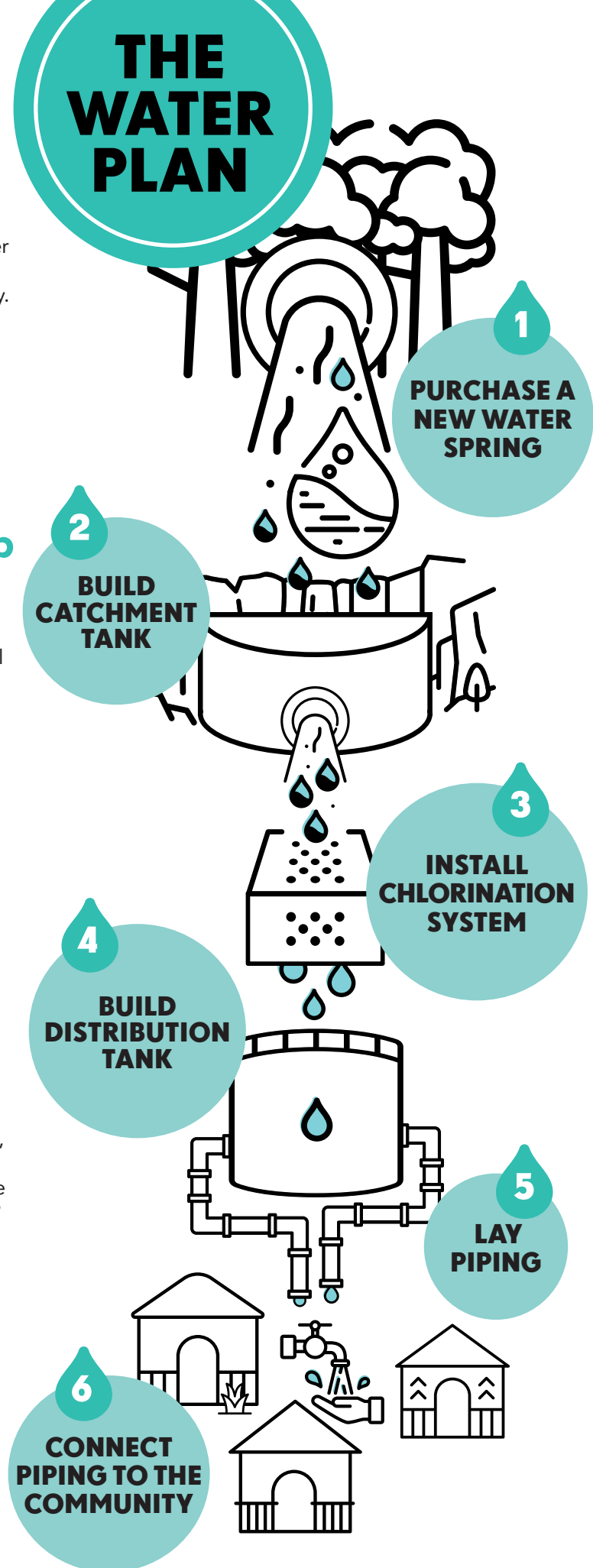


To date, 109 people from Vernon Alliance Church have visited Xonca

Len Thiessen, a church member who's been involved with Xonca for over a decade, explains: "Xonca has been a big part of my life since 2011. My son, Jacob, and I wanted

to do a mission trip, so when VAC confirmed the partnership, we jumped on board the first working team trip! I immediately fell in love with the people, the community, and the country. For the next eight years, I led teams from VAC. On each trip, the same question came up—when will we have clean water? Then along came the COVID-19 pandemic and the trips stopped. But, thankfully, the plan for a quality water system happened anyway!"

With full funding in place, it was finally time to put a plan into action to pipe water from an additional spring to each of the 203 households in the fourth district.





It was tricky work to lay piping in these steep hills.



A massive distribution tank collects spring water from the mountain.



Xonca families can be proud of the expert system they built together.



This water committee will make sure their new system keeps flowing for years to come.



Girls no longer have to waste school hours to collect water!



## Getting the Job Done

FH Guatemala and Xonca leaders put together an aggressive plan to get the job done as quickly as possible. Vernon Alliance backed them up with funding, prayers, and cheers for their success. FH and the community contracted an expert to oversee all the moving pieces of the project. They brought in Diego Ramirez Cobo, a member of Engineers Without Borders who had more than 23 years experience working with water systems. His expertise was a real game changer, leading to key tweaks in the plan that created a strong design and cut project costs.

When the plan, funding, and supplies were all in place, the community threw their full energy into the project. Men and women alike volunteered hours of unpaid labour to hand-carry heavy building materials for the catchment tank from the delivery trucks to the actual construction site—a gruelling 20 minute walk up treacherously steep hills. Led by Diego, they joined the effort to clear the pipeline area, manually dig the ditches to lay the water pipes, and then help install the piping network. To get all this accomplished and still keep up with their own responsibilities at home and at work, the community organized rotating, eight hour shifts every day for each volunteer. The shifts started at 3 AM! And didn't wrap up until 11 AM.

In addition to all these sacrifices, the households waiting for water contributed their own money to support the project. Their voluntary contributions are an example to us all and a strong sign that when their graduation from FH programming comes in 2023, they'll be ready!



**"We all have worked and spent some money for transportation and spent time. The community, too. When we started carrying the rocks and sand, I saw that they were sweating and I ask them: 'Do you know why they are doing this?' [They answered] 'This is for us, not for anyone else.'"**

**- Gasper, President and legal representative of the Xonca Water Committee**

## More Help Arrives

When the municipality saw what was happening in Xonca, the mayor decided to get on board. After years of saying no, the municipality showed up with free construction materials! This contribution had a powerful knock-on effect. It allowed FH Canada and Vernon Alliance to invest not only in building the catchment, distribution, and chlorination system, but also to purchase pipes for the pipeline running from the catchment to the distribution tank. These pipes were initially going to be bought with community money. With these funds freed up, the community was able to invest their money to set up the distribution network to bring water directly to homes. Initially, this network was scheduled in a "Phase 2" of the project to be executed much further down the road. No one imagined it could get done so soon!

## Turning on the Tap

The community of Xonca persevered through years of being told "no." Because of their exemplary determination, enthusiasm, hard work, and sacrifice, the water project was completed within budget, ahead of schedule, and extended beyond the scope of the original plan. Within just five months, the community constructed the catchment and distribution tanks, together with the chlorination system and distribution network. To ensure the sustainability of this precious resource, they set up a water committee responsible for maintenance and oversight.

"I am so proud of the people of Xonca and the hard

work they did to make it happen in such a short period of time," Len shares. "After seeing their struggles with water in the past, I am incredibly happy that they now have a clean, reliable water supply to live healthier lives. I am also a little sad that I didn't get a chance to put my own sweat into the project and share in the celebration of their huge accomplishment when the first water poured out in homes. A part of my heart is still in Xonca."



**"I am very happy because we now have water! For a long time, we did not have water and it was difficult going to the well to collect it. Now that I have water in my home... Thank you for helping us and for your support. May God bless you because water is very important for us. Thank you!"**

**- Jacinta**

The families in Xonca sacrificed time, sweat equity, and hard-earned money to ensure they not only had a communal source of water, but that each individual home could have clean, flowing water right out of their own taps. This will save significant time and back-breaking labour as well as improve family health. 🌱



Are you interested in partnering with a community like Xonca to help get the job done? If so, contact Rhonda to hear more about Step Into Impact partnership opportunities.

fhcanada.org/partner  
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604-992-1923

## Lives Changed



Tomas, Wife Juana and two children—Cecilia and Jacinto

### Tomas Bernal Terraza

Treasurer of the Xonca Water Committee  
Sector 4, Xonca

Tomas and Juana have lived in Xonca for 18 years. They have never had water in their home. Since Tomas works weekdays, Juana collects all the water they need for drinking, cooking, handwashing, bathing, and washing dishes. Every day, two or three times a day, she carries plastic containers to a distant water source to gather water. On laundry days, she hauls their clothes down to the river and either waits for them to dry there or carries them home soaking and heavy. When it rains, they collect runoff from their roof which becomes easily contaminated, breeding larvae as it sits uncovered. All the families in Sector 4 shared their story—until now. Thanks to the joint effort between FH, their Canadian partners, the municipality, and the people of Xonca, Juana no longer trudges long distances to collect water. Today, clean water flows from the tap in their home!