

# Companies Can Help Millions Access Clean Water

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Thanks to organizations like [charity: water](#), [water.org](#) and the [WASH Advocacy Initiative](#), many Americans now know billions of people lack access to safe water and sanitation. These non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and others like them, have successfully highlighted the reduction of disease and death that occurs once people do have access to basic necessities such as safe water. As a result of their advocacy, money has flowed to the cause, wells have been drilled and many more people now have healthier children and families.

At the same time, due to an insufficiency of training and a lack of sustainable programs, many of those wells now are dormant, and poor hygiene is causing contamination of clean water. Many have looked to the private sector to develop products and solutions for those that can pay for water, but few have looked to the private sector to create conditions for NGOs to better succeed in meeting the needs of the poor.

So, why might the private sector want to get involved? The market and employees are demanding it. Long-term business sustainability is driven by relationships, and communities need to know there is a benefit from the presence of these companies. Coca-Cola discovered the need for pre-market investments in poorer communities, and found ways to leverage its infrastructure to solve problems in emerging markets. In [Africa](#), the company made a significant impact on the fight against HIV and AIDS by leveraging its distribution networks to deliver medicines to those infected.

Companies are also hearing from their employees (especially from Generation-Y) that they want on-the-job opportunities to give back. Industry leaders that have implemented such programs, such as IBM, are seeing increases in employee engagement and retention.

Here is how the private sector can help:

### **Create conditions for success**

- **Grow market awareness.** Most people who NGOs are trying to serve are simply unaware that they have a problem with their water. They know they need a cell phone (and in some cases are spending 40 percent of their entire income for it) but they will drink water out of a pond or pipe that is filled with bacteria and parasites. Somehow, the cell phone companies have created a marketing and distribution network to reach everyone on Earth. Can you imagine the impact if the cell phone companies and some of the most successful brands used their marketing genius to make water filters as pervasive as cells phones are today?
- **Demonstrate that there is a problem.** In India, if the water looks clean and clear, it will likely be deemed safe. We can tell people that their water is unsafe, but only significant lab work can prove it to them. Companies need to take on the challenge of creating an inexpensive and easy-to-use test to help show people their water is unsafe. Companies have created this technology for pregnancy tests and insulin levels. Now is the time to develop something to give people a basic sense of the amount of diarrhea-causing cryptosporidium or bacteria that is in their water.

### **Create conditions for successful implementation**

- **Support standard bearers within the safe water sector.** Currently, there is tremendous competition for donor dollars among NGOs. Everyone must advocate for their own technology and approach whether that be chlorination, filtration or boiling. Unfortunately, there is no silver bullet solution to the water crisis, and more organizations like **PATH** are needed to understand what technologies are most desired, and appropriate, in different regions or cultural situations. Organizations also are needed to help determine standards of quality and implementation, as well as to hold people accountable when they fail to meet these standards.
- **Provide assistance with scale and implementation.** An organization that can dig five wells in a month will find it exponentially more difficult to dig 500. Companies can leverage their infrastructure and experience to help organizations implement and scale their activities. Many NGOs look to companies for money, but they also must look to these companies for logistics, finance and marketing support.

Several years ago, I was in Cambodia implementing biosand water filters. When we asked a woman what she would pay for the filter before installation she answered, "Maybe a dollar or two." However, after using it for several months and experiencing dramatic health improvements, she struggled to put a dollar value on the product. I even went so far as to offer her \$500, which she refused. This is just one example of the need.

If companies leverage their communication power to help people understand the essential need for safe water, and can demonstrate that the current water is unsafe, new consumer behaviors will result. People like the woman in Cambodia will take initiative in solving their own water problem by seeking out NGO and commercial solutions. This idea is in contrast to the current situation in which NGO workers are begging for people to understand why they are implementing safe water programs.

If companies leverage their infrastructure to help with implementation, NGOs will become more effective, efficient and will have the ability to scale. As an example, companies can help solve the supply chain problems of fielding technologies as well as the financing structure that maximizes the affordability of these technologies\*\*. Once standards and roadmaps for fielding technologies are identified, more organizations can follow suit.

Companies do not have all the answers and neither do the NGOs. But, together, they can create a framework and solutions that will result in more lives saved, more disease eradicated and more jobs created. Together, we can solve this crisis in our lifetime.

\*\*Recently, Executives Without Borders partnered with the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Dow Chemical to create an International Business Corps (IBC) to facilitate these types of engagements. The IBC assists companies in reaching goals beyond traditional corporate social responsibility programs, and to put their core capabilities and staff to work.

**About us:** Executives Without Borders is a non-profit organization dedicated to engaging business professionals in solving the world's greatest humanitarian challenges. Learn more at [www.executiveswithoutborders.org](http://www.executiveswithoutborders.org). And follow us on [twitter](#) at [ExecWOBorders](#) and friend us on [Facebook](#).