

Drinking Up Data



“Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.” Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s famous (and oft-misquoted) words from “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” may have referred to sailors stranded at sea with no freshwater to drink, but they also describe the plight of many landlocked residents of developing areas—water may be plentiful, but, because they lack water treatment resources, drinking it could be deadly.

That is where nonprofit groups come in. Dozen of charities have been formed with the goal of providing safe water around the world, and, as you have likely garnered from the many articles and news stories about them in *Water Quality Products (WQP)*, their solutions are many and varied—from the tried-and-true, like pumps and biosand filters, to newer innovations like solar-powered systems.

It’s certainly true that not every installation has been a success—pumps or systems fall into disuse if residents do not know how to repair them, or if there are no funds to buy replacement parts. Many groups have implemented methods to combat these issues, however.

Education is the first step—people must understand why it is so important to use treated water and proper hygiene practices in the first place. Some organizations set up a pay structure—users pay a nominal fee for the treated water, helping them see the value of the water while at the same time raising funds to maintain the pump or system. Other organizations take education a step further, by selecting community members and training them to maintain and repair the treatment system.

One group featured in *WQP*, George Mason University (GMU) Engineers for International Development, used such a strategy when implementing biosand filters in an Amazonian village. Two community members were selected to become filter experts, and once they learned about the technology, they conducted lessons for the rest of the villagers. In fact, GMU team members noted that by the end of the trip, the experts were well prepared to maintain the systems, even finding solutions to issues that baffled the team. (For more on this project, see “Pure Water for Peru,” January 2013, and “Achieving Clean Water in the Amazon,” September 2013.)

Strategies like these can be key to a safe water project’s success. But is there a way for an organization to know for certain that a project will succeed—and have the numbers, not just the anecdotes, to back it up? According to the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab, or J-PAL for short, it is; the research institute uses randomized controlled trials to determine the best way to help those in need. While the group studies everything from textbooks to mosquito nets, a recent article in *Wired* magazine (“The Hyper-Efficient, Highly Scientific Scheme to Help the World’s Poor,” December 2013) highlighted a study on water chlorination that provided some surprising results.

The study looked at how to increase use of chlorine to disinfect water in Kenya. J-PAL found that although the vast majority of people knew the benefits of chlorine treatment, only about 2% of homes’ water tested positive for it. Many methods were tried to improve chlorine usage—giving it away, providing coupons, having promoters visit homes—but none were found to be successful. The research team then hit upon a new idea: It installed chlorine dispensers right at the springs where people got their water. The dispensers were a success, with 60% of homes in the study areas testing positive for chlorine in their water. Armed with this data, the group was ready to go forward with implementing the dispensers in other villages, with confidence that they would succeed in reducing waterborne illness.

Ultimately, these studies show that just throwing cash at a problem is not enough—knowledge and hard data are just as important as money to ensuring that everyone around the world has a “drop to drink.”

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