

Doing Good

Getting Water To The World's Poorest

Kerry A. Dolan, 09.11.09, 06:00 AM EDT

Design firm IDEO and Acumen Fund are working to increase clean water supplies in developing countries.



BURLINGAME, Calif. -- Most of us turn on the tap to get a glass of water without thinking much about it. But for nearly 1 billion people in the developing world, that is a luxury out of reach. These people don't have access to safe drinking water, so they get it wherever they can--including from polluted ponds and streams, or from groundwater sources rife with fluoride, salts or arsenic.

Drinking unclean water is one of the primary causes of diarrhea, which is one of the principal causes of death for children under five, a new Unicef report says. Last year an estimated 8.8 million children under five died, primarily in Africa and Asia. A number of for-profit and nonprofit companies have emerged in places like India and Kenya to provide the poor with clean, safe water. But these companies still face hurdles in distributing water to households and making sure the water stays clean.

Acumen Fund, a nonprofit global venture fund focused on alleviating poverty, has invested in a handful of water companies in India and became aware of the problems its entrepreneurs were facing. Design firm IDEO partnered with Acumen to work with water entrepreneurs in India and Kenya. They dubbed their project Ripple Effect and secured \$2.6 million in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

"The challenge was how do we close the last mile of the journey of water to people's houses--and keep it clean?" says Sangeeta Chowdhry, the Ripple Effect project manager at Acumen Fund. In March this year, Acumen and IDEO put on a three-day workshop in Hyderabad with Indian water entrepreneurs and came up with five proposals that would be tested for two months beginning in May.

WaterHealth International, a U.S. company with a large presence in Andhra Pradesh, India, decided to put on a marketing campaign to educate people about the hazards of drinking unclean water. WaterHealth put on a street fair with clowns and other entertainment and gathered lots of people. When the lights went down, the organizers turned on a microscope and projected on a large screen what dirty water looked like, complete with bacteria and other unhealthy bugs.

"One person started crying," recalls Ripple Effect's Chowdhry. Within two weeks WaterHealth India saw a four-fold increase in the number of households signing up to buy water from them.

Design firm IDEO, which works primarily with large corporations to design everything from consumer products to mobile phone interfaces, applied the same principles of what it calls the "human centered design process" when leading the workshop in Hyderabad. They emphasized listening to customers and developing rapid prototypes.

"It's the same process we've used for 30 years," says Jocelyn Wyatt, who leads IDEO's two-year-old social innovation unit. "We combine that with special tweaks to make it relevant to the developing world and to social enterprise."

In mid-September Ripple Effect will host a brainstorming workshop with water companies in Kenya, and develop pilot projects there.

The goal is for the community-oriented water companies to adapt the best of the pilot projects and expand their implementation.

"We think everyone could have safe drinking water by 2025 if we devoted our efforts to it," says Paul Faeth, president of Global Water Challenge, a coalition of 24 groups (including Acumen Fund) focused on universal access to clean water and safe sanitation. Faeth is concerned that the goal of clean water for all by 2025 may not be met. But he praises the work being done by Ripple Effect: "There is some exciting new stuff happening with drinking water."