

# Rethinking Hydro-Philanthropy:



water for people

## Smart Money for Transformative Impact

Edward D. Breslin, CEO, Water For People

**T**he water and sanitation sector is a particularly popular cause for good reason. The need is immense—officially 880 million people lack access to clean water and 2.5 billion people do not have a safe toilet.<sup>1</sup> Children die worldwide because of preventable water and sanitation-related diseases, and estimates abound on the lost productivity in developing countries that can be attributed to the lack of access to water and sanitation.<sup>2</sup> Efforts to push forward legislation, increase finance and get celebrities, musicians, school children and volunteer clubs to sound the clarion call for change are growing.

To those who listen, a slightly softer sound coming from the field can be heard amidst this push for more exposure, more money from individuals, foundations, corporations and governments, and for more coordinated efforts to eradicate water and sanitation poverty worldwide. This sound is the disquieting voice of women and girls from Africa, Asia and Latin America grumbling in frustration that their lives have not been transformed by previous investments in improved water supplies and sanitation, and the simple request to “get it right”. But the images that dominate the sector—pictures of children happily gulping water from a new tap or the counter-image of women collecting water from dirty puddles—do not tell the whole story. The real image should be the one that plays itself out every day all over the world of the woman walking slowly past a broken handpump, bucket at her side or on her head, on her way to (or from) that scoop hole or dirty puddle that she once

hoped would never again be part of her life. As a woman in Salima, Malawi sadly commented, “The broken handpump is a constant reminder of our inability to escape from poverty”.<sup>3</sup>

Data is emerging to support the view that all is not right in the field. IIED suggests that a “catastrophe” is spreading across Africa—approximately 50,000 rural water points are broken and US\$215-360 million of investment wasted because of poor programming and careless implementation. Skinner highlights troubling data from Mali, where 80% of the water points in Menaca region are “dysfunctional”, and surveys from northern Ghana indicating that 58% of existing water points need repair.<sup>4</sup> The IRC (Holland) makes the case that: “In the last 20 years, 600,000–800,000 handpumps have been installed in Sub-Saharan Africa, of which some 30% are known to fail prematurely, representing a total failed investment of between \$1.2 and \$1.5 billion.”<sup>5</sup>

Water point surveys add additional credence to this emerging picture of sector failure. A pilot program in Sanga District, northern Mozambique demonstrated that government assumptions of coverage and project functionality were vastly overstated. Government reported that 72% of communities in Sanga had water supplies per government standards but data showed that the actual coverage was 21.91%. The main reason for the discrepancy was water point failure.<sup>6</sup> Malawi’s efforts to assess the functionality of water points in the country yielded shocking results, with districts like Chikwawa and Phalombe reporting less

1 WHO and UNICEF Joint Monitoring Program 2008. [http://www.wssinfo.org/en/40\\_MDG2008.html](http://www.wssinfo.org/en/40_MDG2008.html)

2 UNDP Human Development Report, 2006, estimates that 5% of African GDP is lost annually due to water- and sanitation-illnesses, and that 443 million school days are lost in India alone due to poor water and sanitation.

3 Personal communication, retold by Steve Sugden, WaterAid, 2002

4 IIED Briefing, March 2009. <http://www.iied.org/pubs/pdfs/17055IIED.pdf>

5 IRC Source Bulletin, 56, May 2009

6 Breslin, 2004, District Mapping in Sanga, Niassa Province, Northern Mozambique. WaterAid. It should be noted that government reports were not purposefully inaccurate but based on the best data they had available. This data allowed them to revise their figures and develop comprehensive plans to address these challenges.



than 50% project functionality, while other districts fared little better.<sup>7</sup>

Africa, Asia and Latin America have become wastelands for broken water and sanitation infrastructure. Go to schools throughout developing countries and you will often find a broken handpump around the corner, or a disused latrine that filled years ago. Sector agencies intuitively know this but the general public is shielded from these hard truths as perceptions of failure could threaten “the cause” of reaching the unserved. Poor people do not benefit from this disingenuity. The sector would actually have a better case to make for more finances if it was able to speak of lasting success and transformative change in the field. Instead, the sector continues to focus on the number of people who remain un-served as justification to throw more money at the problem.

Water and sanitation sector agencies need to improve their work in the field or the goodwill that the sector

currently enjoys will erode.<sup>8</sup> New philanthropic giving strategies could play a significant role in eliminating water and sanitation poverty by basing themselves on a robust set of sustainability metrics. Success will require less single-minded focus on the absolute number of people without access to water and sanitation facilities and more focus on the serious questions around long-term impact and sustainability. So that years after the cameras have left, the donor reports have been filed, and the press release circulated, the community is not forgotten. A new partnership between philanthropists and development agencies would focus less on how much money the sector supposedly needs to solve global water challenges and more on how creative philanthropic giving can be used as leverage to instill financial responsibilities for improved water supply and sanitation on communities and governments in developing countries. A new culture of accountability and transparency that transcends the nonsense that currently masquerades as reporting in the sector must emerge



*After scooping water from a muddy ditch near a water tank, this Rwandan woman heads home with her baby, water and hoe.*

<sup>7</sup> Robert Kampala, WSSCC, 2007, <http://www.wsscc.org/fileadmin/files/pdf/publication/Malawi.pdf>. While this paper is focused primarily on water supply, it is also clear that similar challenges exist in sanitation. To take but one example, The Economist noted in their Special Report on India (December 13 2008) that only 13% of all sewered sanitation is actually treated. Technically all are covered, but only 13% are covered “safely”.

<sup>8</sup> This paper focuses on secular and faith-based development organizations known as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from Europe and North America. But NGOs are only a subset of the many actors intervening in people’s lives through water supply and sanitation development.



if poor people worldwide are to truly emerge from the drudgery of water collection. In the final analysis, sector agencies need to be pushed considerably harder so that African, Asian and Latin American women never need to walk past that broken handpump, rightly grumbling, on their way to collect unsafe water. This can be done in creative and constructive ways through new partnerships between philanthropists and non-profits. Some suggestions for consideration and debate are offered in the following section.

## Smart Investments

Philanthropists are often smart investors who understand risk. Very rarely will successful investors make investments without solid data, a clear understanding of possible short and long-term outcomes and a belief that all role players involved need to share at least some of the risk if the venture is to be successful. These investors also correctly question ventures involving “give-aways”, understanding that free products and services can distort markets and often mask the real cost of running a business that can lead to business failure. Applying sound investment principles would enhance water sector actions considerably, but at times they appear to be forgotten when successful investors become philanthropists and hand over a check to a non-profit organization.

The overriding approach in the sector is of welfare and charity rather than development. Standard practice is short-term focused and pays 100% of the costs of a project. Groups raise funds for a particular project and either transfers these funds to an implementing NGO or increasingly, travels to the field and implement the project themselves.<sup>9</sup> The funds are designed to cover 100% of the project costs and proceed on the assumption that communities are too poor to pay for this investment.

Communities throughout the world actually already pay a great deal for the poor water supplies they

receive. Transparency International argues that “poor households in Jakarta, Lima, Nairobi or Manila spend more on water than residents of New York City, London or Rome.”<sup>10</sup> Data from urban areas and slums consistently show that the poor are paying far more for water supplies than their wealthier counterparts in better-off parts of the city.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to direct costs spent on water supplies, rural communities also spend money on extra costs associated with poor water services in areas like health care and the lost income potential due to time spent collecting water or being sick. Successful water and sanitation interventions truly assess the financial details that will influence sustainability over time. Unfortunately, most organizations shy away from this challenge because it is complex and time consuming. This is short sighted, and projects eventually fail because NGOs lack the capacity and discipline to actually have the initial hard conversation with poor people about finance. This leads to the current paradigm of NGOs dodging this hard work by making the incorrect case that communities suffer not just from water poverty, but also from cashlessness.

NGOs have developed a range of tools to by-pass the perceived lack of finance at local level. The most common is referred to as “sweat equity”. External agencies pay all the hardware costs (pipes, taps, cement, etc) in exchange for the labor and contribution of in-kind local materials from residents as compensation for a community’s “inability” to pay.<sup>12</sup> Sweat equity is seen by many, including Water For People in its earlier days, as a proxy for “ownership”. The argument is simple, and simplistic—if people lay pipe they have demonstrated their commitment to the project, and will therefore own the system and subsequently be responsible for its upkeep over time.

As such, Africa, Asia and Latin America are not only littered with failed projects, but also with free proj-

9 This new philanthropy needs to be questioned in at least three areas. First, the time required to successfully implement water or sanitation projects is considerable and rarely matches volunteer work schedules. As such, hands-on work tends to be rushed and almost always cuts corners. Second, many of the people who go overseas to do direct implementation work are unqualified to do so. For instance, engineering students would not be allowed to implement a project in the United States, it is not clear why they are allowed, and even encouraged, to implement in developing countries. And third, hands-on work always displaces the local private sector, undermining a key role player that the community will eventually need.

10 AFP, 2010, [http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gbK8wiHa\\_lg-hAEfQrj8s\\_N5-q6Q](http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5gbK8wiHa_lg-hAEfQrj8s_N5-q6Q).

11 See for instance evidence from Ghana ([http://www.wateraid.org/ghana/what\\_we\\_do/case\\_studies/4451.asp](http://www.wateraid.org/ghana/what_we_do/case_studies/4451.asp)) and Nairobi <http://www.undp.org/tr/Gozlem2.aspx?WebSayfaNo=719#globhumdev2>. See also <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2006/nov/10/water.environment> and [http://www.undp.bg/uploads/documents/1814\\_788\\_en.pdf](http://www.undp.bg/uploads/documents/1814_788_en.pdf)

12 Local materials can include stone, sand, water, and locally available materials like bamboo that are used for the construction of a water system or latrine.



ects where communities and local governments were never asked to finance any part of the investment in improved water and sanitation facilities. Wise investors would never finance such a scheme and rightly so. The approach and conceptual leaps made by the sector are more PR than substance. The fact that a community can dig water wells, or manually lay a pipe, does not demonstrate that they can actually finance the purchase of a new pipe when one of the pipes they were given for free and installed in the ground breaks. Money is critical to project success as all water systems and toilets will require maintenance over time. Spares will be needed, parts will have to be replaced, and money will have to be raised to keep systems operational.

Charity approaches lead to poor project implementation and do not transform lives despite sector rhetoric to the contrary. Paying 100% of the costs of project implementation establishes dependency from the start. Communities have no idea what it will actually cost to manage or replace their system as this data is hidden from them, and they have no reason not to accept the charity, knowing that the water system will work for awhile, life will be easier for that period at least and when the systems fails maybe someone else will come to rehabilitate the project.

Examples of this failure abound. Water For People has been trying to advise on a project in northern Malawi that continues to struggle because construction has outpaced managerial and financial programming. Reports have been exaggerated to keep funds flowing, with claims of diarrheal reduction that are absolutely unsubstantiated but remain unquestioned by financial donors. The implementing agency is solely focused on hardware because finance for the development of management systems is beyond their remit and capacity. The project will inevitably fail if payment issues are not resolved before water flows because this project is a rehabilitation of a previously failed scheme. The original scheme failed in part because the community did not pay for their water.

A project in Guatemala supported by hands-on volunteers in the name of Water For People still does not work. When the system fails a representative of the community gets a message to the builders in the

**Box One:** Cruz Ché, Guatemala is stuck. Well meaning outsiders built 30 toilets but did not have enough money to help the rest of the community (35 families). The remaining 35 families want free latrines like their neighbors and have rejected Water For People and the Municipality's sanitation program because we insist on financial contributions from the families to help ensure a sense of ownership and demonstrate the ability to cover O&M costs. Sadly this happens a great deal. The well meaning agency did not think beyond their initial investment of 30 toilets and have in the end undermined the further development of the community. Even if the well meaning outsiders installed all 65 latrines on their trip the problem would only have been delayed. The community would have had the same problem when a new family arrived, or a new family was formed and wanted a new latrine. They would simply have said "our parents got free latrines so I am waiting for mine".

Midwest USA who then scrambles to find money and spares to fix the problem. The project is now over a decade old, and the community is no closer to assuming responsibility for their water supply than they were when they first contributed labor as their contribution to the scheme. The Municipality of Tiraque in Bolivia is in the middle of an intense conflict because a group of well-meaning implementers from the USA partially installed six ecological sanitation facilities in a village for free. The Municipality had succeeded in setting a municipal-wide policy on financial contributions from families for improved services that has now unraveled as neighbors ask when they will get their free toilets like the other families had received.<sup>13</sup>

This story plays out day after day in Africa despite the compelling feedback from NGOs and service organizations who demand more money to help the poor. The underlying message of free water systems is that communities are "too poor", "too disorganized" or "too uneducated" to actually lead their own development. All people can contribute is their unskilled labor because they are not "capacitated" enough to offer anything else of real value. The undertones are patronizing without exception. The reality is that most NGOs and almost all hands-on practitioners do not have the

13 The group did not finish the six toilets because it took longer to build toilets than they had estimated—as they have no experience with such matters overseas. They left their designs for the community to complete—all in English. They have promised to come back at a later date but the community has no idea when that might be.



time, patience or the real access and understanding of community development to establish the sound financial underpinnings critical to project success.

Alternative approaches are proving more effective. Better philanthropy based on some of the exact principles that make many philanthropists successful businesspeople are emerging. These approaches use external NGO finances as leverage to access local finances that are co-financed by at least two other entities—the communities themselves and local government. Many countries have developed strict policies on up-front community contributions for good reason—communities need to understand from the beginning what it will cost to maintain and operate their systems over time. Good programs offer communities a range of technology choices and insist that payments are made up-front in line with what tariffs will be required to ensure that the chosen water system is operated effectively, maintained regularly, repaired as needed and eventually replaced.<sup>14</sup>

Creative programs do the hard work of designing tariffs so that wealthier families cross-subsidize poorer families, such as orphan families, single mothers with children and elderly couples caring for their grandchildren, because they understand how to operate in poor communities that are not, despite common perception, economically homogenous. These programs draw on local caring practices but still recognize that an understanding of the balance of finances required to keep the water project operational is still necessary.

If communities want a particular technology but are unable to demonstrate their ability to finance it then alternatives should be considered. Willingness to pay

surveys, where families are asked if they would pay a particular but hypothetical tariff in the distant future has proven ineffective. Families always say yes they will pay as there is no consequence to their answer. Demonstrating the ability to pay, through actual payment before project implementation, is now required.

Government finance is available for improved water supply and sanitation services if properly targeted. Government data from 2005 suggests that a range of countries do not use their entire budget allocated for water supply and sanitation; with countries like Ethiopia using only 38% of what it could have spent, India (9%), Tanzania (43%) and Uganda (55%).<sup>15</sup> The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) study of programming in Malawi, Uganda and Zambia showed that Zambia spent only 9.65% of the budgets it had available in 1999, and only increased this to 24.7% in 2001.<sup>16</sup> Water For People's experience suggests that funding starts to be allocated by governments if NGOs use their finances as leverage, in financial partnership with host-country governments, rather than absolving them of their financial and developmental responsibilities.<sup>17</sup>

Monitoring results suggest that projects co-financed by Water For People are far more sustainable than the ones we once supported with 100% payment for implementation combined with "sweat equity". Most importantly, co-financed projects are almost never referred to as "Water For People's projects" at local level (or anywhere else). Communities rightly call these projects "theirs", demonstrating that elusive sense of ownership that will never be obtained by "sweat equity" alone.

14 Technology choice is crucial as no technology fits every situation. Community members are better placed than outside role players to decide what they can manage technically and financially. In some cases technology choices will be limited by hydrology or geography, but NGOs will more often than not decide what is best for poor communities under the mistaken and arrogant guise that they, as technical experts, know best. See Breslin, E.D.(2003). 'The demand-responsive approach in Mozambique: why choice of technology matters'. In: Waterfront, Issue 16 - Fall 2003, p. 9-10, 12

15 WaterAid (2005). "Getting to Boiling Point", page 32, [http://www.wateraid.org/documents/plugin\\_documents/getting\\_to\\_boiling\\_point\\_1web.pdf](http://www.wateraid.org/documents/plugin_documents/getting_to_boiling_point_1web.pdf)

16 Slaymaker, T. and Newborne, P. (2004) "Implementation of Water Supply and Sanitation Programmes under PRSPs", <http://www.odi.org.uk/resources/download/1663.pdf>

17 Many agencies complain about government corruption as a reason to by-pass government. I have been the technical advisor to government water departments in a number of countries and can confirm that corruption occurs in a number of ways. Two important and obvious places to focus on combating corruption are with the awarding of government construction contracts (the official says "I will give you this contract but you will pay me \$X from the contract for my support") and project supervision (the technician says "I will overlook the poor quality of construction if you pay me \$X"). A less obvious source of corruption is when the government develops its annual budget and includes finances for water supply in defined villages. If a well-meaning group decides to build a water facility in a village the government has targeted for support then the money that would have been used for that village is simply pocketed. Free projects facilitate corruption. Indirect implementing agencies like Water For People are showing that efforts to push government to actually pay for projects in their areas can increase accountability. Poor people would be better served in the future if their governments were responsive and accountable as opposed to aloof and predatory. This is hard work, but important and generally outside NGO time frames.



Philanthropists can change the sector dramatically by simply focusing their investments around a few principles:

- Investing their money only when an NGO can show this donation will be used as leverage with counterpart funds from communities and local government.
- Insisting that clear tariffs have been developed and that communities can in fact pay these—through up-front payments—so that the project has a better chance of success.
- Not allowing NGOs to continue to propose “sweat equity” as an alternative to cash payments.

This refocus on finance would force NGOs to do the hard collaborative work necessary to create the conditions for sustainable and lasting water and sanitation development by getting communities and governments to play their financial parts as well. Projects fail for a range of reasons but a focus on smart money would help shift the sector from charity to development, to the benefit of poor people worldwide.

## Beyond Beneficiaries

If we read annual reports, strategic plans and other sector materials it becomes clear that the sector focuses almost exclusively on counting beneficiaries of projects as a proxy of success. That is, the larger the number of people supported with improved water and sanitation facilities in a given year by an NGO or other agency the greater the perceived success of their work. Sadly, sector agencies almost never consider measuring sustainability despite the careless overuse of this term.

Yet success can only be measured in one way—do the beneficiaries the sector trumpets annually actually have running water and no longer defecate in environmentally unsound ways years after the project was inaugurated? Are these beneficiaries, and their children, and their grandchildren erased from that horrible global figure of those who lack access to safe water and improved sanitation so that those numbers truly come down?

The answer to all these questions is sadly but resoundingly no, because the sector and funders continue to seek immediate successes over longer-term transformative results.

The heart of the problem lies in the sector agencies’ unwillingness to put their reputations on the line and truly define and measure “sustainability”. Water For People has learned this lesson directly from its own experience. We are emerging from our first organizational strategic plan (2007-2011) having achieved most goals two years early—operational in 10 countries, allocating over 80% of our finances to programmatic work, achieving organizational excellence targets and shortly surpassing our goal of supporting 1,000 people/day with improved water or sanitation facilities per our previous alignment with this universal measuring stick.

Water For People could celebrate its achievements and launch a new strategic plan that follows sector strategic planning norms—simply expanding the number of countries of operation during the defined strategic plan period, increasing the number of beneficiaries (sometimes considerably, suggesting “scale”) and exponentially growing the amount of funding raised to help achieve the ambitious beneficiary targets in comparison to the previous organizational strategic plan. We could throw the word “sustainability” into the mix a few times for good measure and avoid any effort to actually hold ourselves accountable for results **over time**. And truthfully, Water For People probably could raise considerably more money than we do now given sector realities and expectations without ever having to show lasting results.

Water For People has learned over the past four years that counting beneficiaries as its primary measure is an inaccurate indicator of success and impact. We rightly celebrate the exciting day when families get a new water point. But this day is only the start of an important journey that we need to better track and understand. We have learned that the question is not how many people we help in Year X, but how many of these people still have services in the years that follow. Our Board of Directors has pushed us to be more accountable by asking better questions. How many people never have to turn to an NGO again for support

18 Good monitoring will show that the formation of water committees and the training of these committees to be mini-utilities are unlikely to be sustainable over time. Committees are fragile and deteriorate over time. Local private sector alternatives to water committees that have the potential to provide better service, less downtime and greater efficiency are emerging as a viable alternative to sector practice that will be explored in a forthcoming paper.



once the expected lifespan of their new water facilities or latrine, supported originally by Water For People, ends? How many communities actually have the ability to maintain and replace their systems so that they never have to go back to a dirty water point or seek new charitable support?

The sector would be transformed, and the quality of NGO support to poor communities throughout the world would dramatically improve, if sector agencies, philanthropists and activists dedicated to transformative results changed the metrics from numbers of beneficiaries to actual measurements of sustainability (not just proxies or anecdotes).

For water supply, core sustainability indicators could include:

- The **quality** of water meets host country government standards over time—with a focus on bacteriological parameters (E. coli and total coliforms) **plus** any other water quality challenges that are known in the area and that undermine household health (like arsenic in West Bengal, India).
- The **quantity** of water available to households meets host country government standards over time.
- That the water system is inoperable for **no more than one day** per month.
- The **number of users** per water point meet host country government standards.

Linked to this could be a series of financial indicators as payment for water supply. As discussed above, finance is the cornerstone of sustainable services, just like in North America and Europe. Water tariffs are paid in North America and Europe because this revenue is critical to the continued flow of water. A simple truth is that a lack of finance for ongoing operation, maintenance, repair and replacement means that the system will eventually fail as suggested earlier. The women and girls of a community will have to go back to collecting water from unprotected sources and will be looking for a new NGO to come and “save the day” by providing a new water system.

Water For People is implementing a program called “3, 6, 10” which links the core sustainability indicators listed above (quality, quantity, access and limited down time)

**Box Two:** Possible sustainability indicators for sanitation:

- No open defecation
- No feces or urine on floor/seat/walls of latrine
- Latrine are being replaced when full or cleaned as needed so that family can always use a latrine
- No family without a toilet in the community.

Possible sustainability indicators for handwashing:

- People in communities know all times when handwashing needs to be practiced
- People are demonstrating proper handwashing technique
- Soap or other cleansing agent and water are available for handwashing at the latrine and in the kitchen.

with the following crucial financial indicators so that we can really hold ourselves accountable for our work:

- **3 years following project completion**—evidence that money is available for repairs, that repairs are happening and the account is well managed (accurate financial management, no fraud, etc).
- **6 years following project completion**—enough money is available to replace the most expensive part of the system.
- **10 years following project completion**—enough money is available to replace the entire water system.
- **And ultimately, what percentage of community water systems and sanitation facilities supported in part by Water For People are actually replaced without the financial support of another external NGO, with the goal being 90%.**

The final indicator identified above is the most important one. There is no time limit on this as different technologies have different operational life spans but it will be critical to measure whether funds are available locally (between the community, local government and increasingly local private sources such as microfinance institutions and even private operators) that actually lead to



replaced systems. This is the real measure of whether the water and sanitation poverty cycle is truly broken.<sup>18</sup>

It is intentional that none of the indicators identified above focus on health outcomes. It is extremely difficult to demonstrate conclusively that a specific water intervention has led to a clear health outcome without doing complex studies utilizing control groups that do not receive the same intervention. This is a questionable use of scarce sector resources and can be morally problematic. What is certain is that no positive health outcomes can be expected if the project fails. As such, if the sector can begin to demonstrate that water is flowing, toilets used and managed hygienically and hands are being washed at key times then that would be an enormous step forward for the sector, without having to take that extra step to show that water and sanitation are functioning **and** health has improved.

It is also important to point out that such outcomes cannot be expected in certain countries with failed states (like Somalia) and during humanitarian relief situations (like the eastern Congo or war-torn parts of Sudan). But in the vast majority of countries where NGOs operate such outcomes should be sought.

The indicators above are sound because they focus on core outcomes that will highlight whether local responses to the inevitable water and sanitation challenges are actually effective. Populations will grow. Are managerial and financial systems in place to meet the growth of communities through service expansion? Or do people simply overuse the existing infrastructure leading to faster breakdowns, longer queuing times at the water collection point and a certain trip back to that dirty puddle when the system is run into the ground? Water quality is deteriorating worldwide. Do we see local responses to water quality degradation? Or do we continue to turn a blind eye to this reality and simply celebrate the fact that water was once clean six years ago in a village featured in an annual report that helped raise lots of money because it was a compelling case study? Finance matters. Do we focus on money collected and how it is used to solve technical problems over time? Or do we take a picture of the ribbon being

cut to open the water point as our only indicator?

If communities meet the sustainability indicators suggested above, and eventually replace their systems with no new NGO bailout, then the cycle of water poverty has been broken. If they do not, then the celebrations over beneficiaries that filled a report three years earlier are meaningless and misleading.

The number of beneficiaries needs to be abandoned as the primary indicator of success for water and sanitation interventions. Donor agencies, philanthropists and foundations would help change the world if they began demanding accountability for long-term results after the NGO has completed its work rather than focusing on how many people were helped with each program or project. By all means let the world know how many people were supported in a given year and celebrate the fact that a family is now collecting water from a protected source. But if we must “count” beneficiaries then perhaps sector agencies should start counting people a number of years after work has been completed and only if water is still flowing, people are paying water fees, and water quality and quantities are being sustained. It’s a simple shift in metrics: instead of counting initial beneficiaries, count and focus on the number of people who continue being beneficiaries 3, 6 and 10 years later. This shift in metrics would force many great organizations caught in the rut of counting beneficiaries to rethink and rework how they operate and significantly benefit poor people worldwide. Sustainability challenges will be brought to the fore and addressed rather than hidden in the dark as is the case today.

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*Celebrants at the new water project in Cotani Piqueria, Bolivia see new hope for their community during the inauguration of their water system. Their true celebration will happen with each passing year of functionality.*

## Conclusion

People without improved water and sanitation services are not helped by bad programming, simplistic giving and a focus on short-term results that counts beneficiaries immediately after implementation. Philanthropists can make a dramatic non-financial contribution to people without safe water and hygienic sanitation by simply asking harder questions about how sustainability will be programmed for and measured, demanding long-term results and requiring NGOs, and other development agencies to be held accountable over time as a condition **before** they invest in an NGO's initiative. This means that monitoring will actually happen instead of being neglected by NGOs, and results over time will matter more than annual beneficiaries of new services.

The NGO sector will respond to this because NGOs are filled with tremendously smart and dedicated professionals who are currently responding to the philanthropic market. More investment in water and sanitation interventions without dramatically different results and metrics should no longer be accepted.

If philanthropists and NGOs spoke frankly and honestly about what needs to change to alter the dysfunctional philanthropic market and unsustainable programming that currently exists, in a way that focuses on smart investments and accountability for sustainable outcomes, then we really can eliminate water and sanitation poverty worldwide and truly transform lives forever. And that would be a great story indeed!