

Volunteer Organizations Aid Global Water Supplies

Gary Woodard, J.D., M.P.P. – SAHRA,
University of Arizona

The lack of safe, convenient, and reliable water supplies is a major problem faced by developing countries. Between 1.4 and 2 billion people may lack access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation. Half the population of developing countries suffers from one or more waterborne diseases, which kill more than 5 million people each year. Other costs are less obvious: in many villages, young women and girls spend hours each day fetching water from remote streams or springs, keeping them from more productive work or getting an education.

International organizations have grappled with the problem for decades, with some success. But small groups of water professionals are increasingly taking matters into their own hands, raising modest funds, buying simple equipment, and traveling to remote deserts and jungles to dramatically improve the water supply for some of the neediest populations. Typical projects involve replacing a distant or contaminated surface water supply with a simple, reliable pump, or installing a basic sewage system and teaching hygiene. Local people help with the construction and are trained to do maintenance.

Some of the more active organizations engaged in improving water supplies are:

Water for People (www.water4people.org), established in 1991 by water professionals associated with the American Water Works Association. They support projects worldwide that focus on locally sustainable drinking water, sanitation, and hygiene education. Emphasis is on building with locally available materials and involving community members in construction and maintenance.

The U.S. Chapter of Engineers without Borders (www.ewb-usa.org) works to bring clean water and sanitation to the developing world, and supports the

formation of student chapters of Water for People on U.S. campuses. Participants obtain hands-on experience using sustainable and appropriate technologies while providing simple, inexpensive, and robust solutions to civil engineering problems.

Lifewater

International (www.lifewater.org) strives to eliminate disease and poverty caused by unsafe drinking water. The Motley Fool, an investment advice column and Web site, recently lauded the group because “they create sustainable solutions, their missions are epic in scope, and their beneficiaries participate in their own aid.” Some 200 active volunteers and national crews have worked throughout the world installing wells and water systems that now serve



Locals participate in constructing a well with a Lifewater International volunteer crew in sub-Saharan Africa. Photo by Vince Tidwell, Sandia National Laboratories.

more than 200,000 people.

Manna International Relief and Development (www.nohunger.org), works to empower and educate youth to address global concerns. In addition to an active water development program, Manna provides emergency relief and supports medical clinics. The organization requests donations of well-drilling equipment; previous donations are in use in a dozen countries.

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