

Water Projects:

The Harm Caused by Well-Meaning Philanthropists



I first met Dona Fatima while driving on a terrible road in northern Mozambique. My Mozambican water sector colleagues and I were always able to find water points in passing villages because we had to drive so slowly on the deeply rutted roads. Dona Fatima, a woman who appeared to be over 50 years old but could easily have been much younger, was crying next to a broken hand pump.

Dona Fatima was responsible for this water system, installed 15 months earlier by a group of well-meaning people from the US who decided to solve this community's water problems. The group of philanthropists had come, done a needs assessment, returned to the US, raised funds, designed the system (in the US), returned to Mozambique and installed a shiny new hand pump.

The Americans had trained Dona Fatima and a few other women to maintain the pump, although the duration of their visit to the community was short. They had to return to their jobs and universities, so the project had to be completed quickly. The project was guided

By Ned Breslin

by the philanthropists' agendas and time frames, not by the needs of the community.

Despite their best intentions, the philanthropists had not, in the end, solved the community's water problem. Tragically, they had increased problems in the village, as community members could not understand why those trained to repair the water system had failed. Dona Fatima, in her own estimation and in the eyes of the community, let this community down. People were back in the river fetching unsafe water and were angry with Dona Fatima. She was scared.

The reality is that Dona Fatima did nothing wrong. Sound development practices consistently demonstrate that it is impossible to successfully install a water system in the way that this group of well-meaning people had attempted. Water systems are rarely (dare I suggest almost never) about 'good design' as most people

understand that term. Those who work in international water development know that the designs are all pretty simple and well-understood in-country. Most importantly, the capacity to design is always available in-country and, unfortunately, rarely exploited by US-based philanthropists who want to 'get their hands dirty'.

Dona Fatima's story is sadly a common one. In my 16 years in southern Africa, I saw her tragedy repeated over and over again. Well-meaning volunteers, bent on performing hands-on development work, flew in at a record pace and quickly left with great experiences for themselves and to the loud applause of cheering, grateful community members, only to have their efforts wasted in the end as the projects ultimately failed. The saddest irony of this is that few of the people who came to 'solve' the community's problems actually came back to see if the systems were operational for the long term.

Philanthropists of this nature do not monitor their work, but simply move on to the next community. Yet water project

failures are the hidden elephant in the room among water sector professionals. Africa in particular is littered with well-intentioned efforts that have gone awry.

Due to a variety of issues, water sector development is more challenging than many other development initiatives. For instance, Rotary International has been extremely successful at eradicating polio worldwide. This health challenge is extremely conducive to direct, hands-on experience. A Rotarian from Michigan can easily visit an area and efficiently give medicine to thousands of children.

Successful water supply work is not so easy. Evidence from around the world shows quite clearly that water supply takes a great deal of time, requires constant community engagement to address issues of finance, community dynamics and water system operation and maintenance.

Successful water project implementation requires a view beyond the community to ensure access to affordable spare parts, technical support for challenges beyond the community's capacity, and good understanding of sector policies, practices and strategies. Finally, water resource management has become crucial, proving that no community is an island, but part of a wider dynamic that

is not so easy to solve in just a few visits.

The challenge is really about how to tap into the great enthusiasm and wonderful intentions of people in the United States who want to help and want to get their hands dirty but whose approach consistently delivers poor long-term results. No credible agency involved in water supply—whether NGO, bilateral/multilateral donor or private-sector company—follows such an implementation strategy, yet this approach continues to be followed by so many people who want to help.

How can philanthropists be held accountable for their work and what are the consequences of project failure on those who, despite the best intentions, leave people like Dona Fatima by the side of the road crying? It is these challenges and not the challenges of water system design or finance that activist philanthropists should be addressing first, before they decide to step in and 'solve' a community's water problems.

About the author

◆ *Edward D. (Ned) Breslin* joined *Water For People* as its *Director of International*



Programs in January 2006. He had worked in the water supply, sanitation and hygiene sector in southern Africa for 13 years for two local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and WaterAid. He brought with him strong management skills coupled with a proven record of innovation, implementation and successful field experience. Breslin served as Health and Hygiene Education Manager in South Africa with the Moula Trust; as Development Director in South Africa with Operation Hunger and as Development Officer and Policy Analyst in Washington, D.C. for the Madison Public Affairs Group. He has a Masters of Arts Degree from the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa and a BA in political studies from St. Lawrence University in Canton, N.Y. He can be reached via email at Nbreslin@waterforpeople.org.

