

Safe Water: A Market-Based Approach

Health need

Safe drinking water is essential to good health. However, in resource-poor settings, water often comes from unsafe sources and carries deadly pathogens. The World Health Organization estimates that 1.1 billion people lack access to improved water supplies, and 1.8 million people—including nearly 5,000 children a day—die each year from preventable diarrheal diseases; many of these deaths are attributed to unsafe water.

Various products exist today to treat and safely store water. Yet, according to international experts, less than 1% of those without access to improved water supplies are being reached with current efforts to promote household water treatment and storage. Clearly, the scale of the problem is far beyond what current efforts can handle.

Technology solution

Commercial markets currently supply low-income consumers in the developing world with household goods such as soap, food items, and basic commodities. PATH understands that household water treatment and safe storage (HWTS) products can be successfully marketed and sold to these consumers in a similar way for positive health outcomes.

Market-based solutions offer a number of potential advantages. In general, the private sector is more nimble and innovative, has greater resources, is more responsive to consumer preferences, and has the potential for sustainability and scalability without ongoing subsidies. Through the Safe Water Project, PATH has worked to catalyze and facilitate new partnerships and approaches to selling HWTS to low-income consumers. By providing incentives and reducing risks for commercial partners, PATH works to launch them in new directions, serving a low-income market. The goal is that partners can take these initiatives to scale—independent of PATH—and the marketplace will make them sustainable, ultimately leading to a greater overall impact on health.

Current status and results

PATH's strategy is to invest in activities that advance the household water treatment category and benefit all organizations that seek to increase access to water treatment products to low-income populations. PATH and our partners have developed and are currently testing market models in India, Southeast Asia, and Eastern Africa.

In India, users were engaged as co-designers to inform the creation of product design guidelines for companies developing new products for low-resource settings. Four PATH-improved products are being carried forward by private-sector partners, including two water treatment elements and two HWTS gravity-fed devices. One improved HWTS device is already being sold in Cambodia. PATH is implementing pilot projects in a number of countries to test four market-based distribution models. PATH also continues to refine tools to support our distribution partners around sales recruiting and training, active monitoring, and encouragement of sound enterprise operating principles.



PATH/Glenn Austin

A young girl collects water to use in the home.

“Current efforts in household water treatment and storage are reaching only 7-8 million people, or less than 1% of those without access to safe water.”

Thomas Clasen, London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine.

Availability

For more information regarding this project, contact Glenn Austin at gaustin@path.org.

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