

Social Innovators Spur Change in the Dominican Republic

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More than 2 billion people do not have access to safe drinking water, and each year more than 1 million people die because of water-related diseases. These facts can make life unbearable for affected communities and future generations. A [World Health Organization study](https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43840/9789241596435_eng.pdf;jsessionid=3FEEA9CE482669BDC1841B2EC9678E04?sequence=1)

(http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/43840/9789241596435_eng.pdf;jsessionid=3FEEA9CE482669BDC1841B2EC9678E04?sequence=1) found that investing in water and sanitation globally would result in an additional 320 million productive days and 272 million school attendance days a year, as well as 1.5 billion additional healthy days for children under the age of five.

In short, water is integral to every aspect of daily life, and access to it brings both direct and indirect benefits. The direct benefits include cleaner hands and healthier bodies. The indirect benefits include a chance for children to grow up with opportunities for healthy and more stable lives, free from the immense burden of searching for clean water. Women and girls often must retrieve water for their families, spending at least 30 minutes a day for each trip, carrying heavy loads of water and missing school. With the added pressure of gender roles involved in access to clean water, women and girls are pushed even further down into the cycle of poverty.

Social entrepreneurs

(<https://eiexchange.com/content/how-social-entrepreneurs-can-create-impact-for-a-better-world>) can play a valuable role in helping communities to overcome difficult problems like these. One innovative organization committed to serving communities in this way is Surge for Water. Founded in 2008, Surge for Water invests in communities around the world by helping them develop safe water, sanitation and hygiene solutions. To these ends, over the years they've built

wells and rainwater tanks, brought water purification systems and toilets to underserved communities, and developed educational programs on hygiene and menstrual health. Surge works hand in hand with local partners to design and develop the right solutions, using local products and customizing education programs.

One of Surge's long-term programs in the Dominican Republic was delivered in partnership with Project Hearts to improve people's access to safe water via filters and household water collection tanks. Sharing Surge's experiences can be useful for other entrepreneurial-minded people who want to make an impact.

Program Overview

The Dominican Republic has seen some of the fastest rates of economic growth in the Latin America and Caribbean region. Although this has greatly reduced poverty and elevated the middle class, families are still at risk of falling back into poverty (World Bank, 2020). In the Dominican Republic, Surge for Water provides support to the community of Baitoa in partnership with Project Hearts. Baitoa is a rural community in the north, where only a small fraction of the homes receive water from the local water supply company every two to three weeks. As a result, families rely on rainwater collection; face purchasing expensive clean water bottles; or resort to drinking non-potable water, resulting in the spread of illness. Through distributing ceramic water purification filters and installing water collection tanks, Surge for Water and Project Hearts have provided thousands of people in Baitoa with accessible clean water solutions for generations to come.

Program Details

Working with Project Hearts, a local organization, Surge for Water has been providing families in need with safe water access via ceramic water purification filters and



household water collection tanks (tinacos). The tinacos use gravity to supply up to 300-500 gallons of water to a home, reducing the need for an electric pump. In areas of the country that have access to water only at certain hours or experience electricity shortages, this is the only option to ensure constant access to water.

These solutions are implemented via a network of Community Health Leaders, who educate locals on improved sanitation and hygiene practices along with several other health topics. Families purchase filters and water tanks using a microfinance model. This has created local jobs and provided an improved, healthier life for hundreds of families annually. Many of the families who previously purchased bottled water can now use the money for other essential household needs such as food, books, and farming supplies.

What's Ahead

Having access to clean and safe water saves lives and changes them for the better. Access to clean water and sanitation not only improves health outcomes, but also diminishes the labor and time required for its acquisition, especially for women and children. In fact, we estimate that every \$1 invested in improved water and sanitation returns \$4 to \$12 in economic gains.

Through the efforts of Project Hearts and Surge for Water, more families in Baitoa now have access to clean, potable water via water tanks and purification filters.

“Thanks to [Surge’s] support, we have reached places and homes with great water needs where they have nowhere to store it, homes that have been forgotten and where water and education is difficult to reach.”

Team Member, Project Hearts

The work is not finished. Baitoa continues to have challenges with access to clean water. It lacks a fixed, constant water source, and homes in more remote, hard-to-reach locations continue to rely on rainwater collection systems. The next steps are advocating for local stakeholder support in providing WASH

(Water Access, Sanitation and Hygiene) resources, including increasing delivery of water to remote communities; allocating funds to construct a community aqueduct; strengthening local infrastructure to eliminate water transportation barriers; and promoting access to WASH programs provided by local organizations.

Takeaways

As the Surge for Water story shows, social innovation is not that different from product or service innovation. The same thinking and skills that help create successful businesses can be channeled towards solving stubborn societal problems. Here are some things we learned from our experience, for entrepreneurs who yearn to make a difference.

Get a full view of the challenges and opportunities

-- Surge for Water did a “force field analysis” to understand all the factors shaping the water crisis in the Dominican Republic. The challenges included lack of access to potable water, which made people dependent on rainwater and cisterns; lack of water infrastructure and purification; and natural disasters. On the other hand, Surge for Water understood that several factors could help them achieve their mission, including strong local public and private institutions, community engagement, and general support for cleaner water.

Build partnerships – Integrating local actors prioritizes community concerns and helps identify best practices and approaches that will address WASH community needs. Surge for Water partnered with Project Hearts, a local organization that understands the Baitoa community and is dedicated to helping its citizens live a higher quality of life. Their focus is on educating and empowering those they serve to achieve long-term results.

Use the right financial model – At first impoverished families needed microfinancing to purchase their water filters and tinacos. Over time, as more people enjoyed a rise in income, more families could afford to buy this equipment at full price and without financing. Consequently, Project Hearts no longer needed Surge for Water to continue providing a free or discounted option to the community as people paying full price could subsidize those who could not pay full price. Further, Project Hearts can use proceeds from buyers who pay-in-full for tinacos to purchase additional rainwater collection tanks. This revenue also helps fund some of Project Heart’s other programs and operational

cost. Therefore, the program related to rainwater collection tanks and filters became self-sustaining.

Celebrate key program milestones – Take time to celebrate key program milestones, such as the end of a partnership. For Surge and Project Hearts, letting the community identify their needs for developing sustainable programs and continuing to assess changing WASH needs at the community level, allowed for ongoing program evolution and now, the self-sustaining program after nearly a decade of working together.

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