

Liquid Need

How one organization works with companies to help global communities access safe water

By Belinda Sharr

Clean water and access to sanitation are basic human rights, according to the U.N. However, for millions of people around the globe, having access to these necessities is nearly impossible. WaterAid is stepping in to help. The international non-profit organization seeks to improve the availability of safe water, hygiene products, and sanitation services. Through its partners, the company provided 2 million people with safe water and 3 million people with sanitation last year.

WaterAid CEO Sarina Prabasi says that the impact of clean water reaches many levels of society—some that people may not often consider. The effect of poor water quality specifically worsens the quality of life for women. “In many countries not having safe water means a young girl is collecting water instead of going to school. So there’s a particular impact on women and girls,” Prabasi says. “They are responsible for collecting water, and walking long distances for privacy [for personal hygiene]. They are looking for a place to go and that makes women more vulnerable to rape, injuries, and attack.”

WaterAid helps poor communities set up practical and sustainable water, sanitation, and hygiene projects based on their needs. It works with local partners and community members to do an assessment in an area and come up with the best methods or technologies to help. This includes installing taps and toilets and providing education about good hygiene. “Basic, primary interventions, like hand washing with soap, have proven to be the most cost-effective intervention for health,” explains Prabasi. “There is a lot of preventable suffering in the world, and the organization is focused on that.”

WaterAid also advocates to governments and high-profile organizations to create political will to end the water and sanitation crises. It creates awareness to ensure programs reach the poorest and most vulnerable with quality services, in partnership with local government and civil society.

Prabasi says that getting clean water can help communities grow successfully and improve their future: “I think that water sanitation and hygiene are the basic foundations,” she says. “If you don’t have these things it’s very hard to get to the next step, out of poverty.”

Corporations and businesses are partnering with WaterAid to help.

“We are working more and more with businesses. Traditionally, corporations have a philanthropic arm. It’s a separate part that will donate that will support doing good in the world. The thinking is doing good has to be part of doing business. We’re proud of the corporate partners we do have. We work with them in a way that doing good is part of doing business,” Prabasi says.

WaterAid has partnered with dozens of leading companies in the US and abroad that represent a wide range of industries, including beauty, tech, apparel, beverage and banking among many others. Partnerships with the corporate sector are an essential part of WaterAid’s work, and make an important

contribution to helping us solve the water and sanitation crisis in the world's poorest communities, according to the company.

"Each of these partnerships is uniquely crafted to maximize the goals of the corporate partner, and of WaterAid," the company says. A specific examples include WaterAid's partnership with apparel powerhouse H&M.

H&M and WaterAid have worked together to try to end the water and sanitation crisis for more than 10 years. Together, they have teamed up on gift cards, swimwear campaigns, point of sale marketing, employee engagement initiatives and opportunities to leverage celebrity spokespersons—all efforts geared towards raising both money and awareness around the need for clean water and toilets. In 2014 as part of H&M Conscious Foundation's global program, the companies set a goal of reaching 250,000 students over a three year period, according to WaterAid.

H&M and WaterAid currently work together in 5 countries: Ethiopia, India, Pakistan, Tanzania, and Uganda. The countries chosen are all places where access to water, sanitation, and hygiene in schools today are lacking, impacting negatively on the health and education of students.

"In line with our sustainability model, and central to what we believe as essential for long-term success, these are also countries in which we think it is possible to achieve more long-term change by influencing the policies and practices of authorities," WaterAid says.

So how can a company help with this huge issue? Prabasi says there are a lot of ways, and every business can contribute uniquely by partnering with WaterAid. Businesses can get involved in any number of ways, ranging from cause marketing programs, to community fundraising or employee-driven campaigns. The opportunities are endless and can be uniquely matched to the needs and interests of each company. WaterAid has worked with corporate partners on a wide range of initiatives, including ones that support efforts to reduce the amount of water being used in business' operations, providing clean water and toilets for workers in their supply chains and raising awareness and policy effectiveness in the US.

One of the newest ways that businesses can get involved is through a new employee development challenge called Water Innovators. Water Innovators gives companies the opportunity to register teams of employees to compete with others around the world to solve a real problem faced by WaterAid in one of the countries we work in, raise funds for water and sanitation projects and learn new skills and leadership qualities.

"We're always happy to talk to companies if they are interested in this issue, and what that fit might look like for them. It works best when it is customized," Prabasi says.

"We're the catalyst and facilitator. Our work shows how it can be done; with training with the local communities. It's about influencing policies. We do testing, learning and try to keep close eye on what's working and share that information more broadly," she says. "In basic ways we're looking to see why is it that people don't have access and what will it take [for them to gain access]? It's not always the technology only. Its training, upkeep, political priority. It takes a whole system to keep a service running."

Water is necessary for life and it should be available to all. This sums up the goal of WaterAid and its partners. “Water runs through everything. Water is part of the lifecycle—the water cycle. We focus on water for people’s basic livelihood needs.”