

When Help is Not Helpful

For the Cambodian poor, lack of access to safer drinking water is one of the biggest problems. Approximately two-thirds of the rural population lives without access to safer, potable water, and consequently, many Cambodian families are prone to water borne diseases. Many Cambodian children regularly suffer from diarrhea on a regular basis, and diarrhea is the second highest causes of death in children under 5 worldwide. Nearly one in five child deaths – about 1.5 million each year – is due to diarrhea. So how has international aid caused more diarrhea in Cambodia?

Recognizing the need to increase access to safer water, many well-intended NGOs gave away ceramic water filter pots (CWP) which can safely remove over 99% of the solid pollutants and bacteria in the water. This temporarily helped make water safer for consumption at home, but soon, people began to expect a freebie. Even when villagers were aware of the health benefits of the CWP, they waited for a hand-out, for indefinite amounts of time, delaying their access to safer water, rather than buying the product at approximately the same price as a case of 12-pack beer; about US\$9. CWPs that were given away were also less used and more likely to be damaged than CWPs that were purchased. Some customers also shunned the product as something for the poor, since in the past it had been given away to the poor.

As such, handouts and subsidies have created market distortion, cultivated dependency, making it difficult to provide safer drinking water solutions to the Cambodian people.

Source: Lee, Elise. "When Help is Not Helpful." Global Institute for Tomorrow. 26 May 2010. Web. 10 Apr. 2011.