

VentureBeat

The Water Initiative offers a business plan to help the world's poor

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Finding clean water has always been difficult in remote areas and developing countries. Yet despite a long-standing knowledge of the problems, progress has been slow for many years. A new venture called The Water Initiative hopes to try a new approach that could be helpful to billions.

The theory is that one of the main barriers to universal clean water is the lack of one-size-fits-all solutions. The world map presents a fragmented jigsaw of problems, from local pathogens and in-transit fouling of water to high levels of chemicals like arsenic and fluoride.

So it took a large team of scientists, entrepreneurs and businessmen — each of whom understands a part of the puzzle — to start The Water Initiative. The company hopes to attack unclean water at a community level, applying technology on a case-by-case basis.

Co-founder Kevin McGovern calls TWI an “integrator,” taking equipment from many outside companies and combining it with its own in-house tech to form devices suitable for local markets. Instead of simply creating the water filters, though, they’ll start with a study of the community they’re entering. That’s the opposite of the usual approach, McGovern claims, which tries to market the same devices in every location.

“A lot of tech-driven companies don’t have an understanding of where their product fits. They think it works in all situations and areas,” he says.

Despite the variations, each device will fit a broad schema. A macro-filter first removes large particles. Next, a micro-filter strains out the local impurities, whether it’s a stomach bug or arsenic. A tester ensures the water’s safety, and finally, a power source drives the process — keeping in mind that not all areas will have reliable electricity.

After working with local communities to develop the device, TWI will sell it at the household level. That’s helpful for several reasons. First, the company avoids having to convince poor governments to invest in expensive infrastructure. Second, impurities acquired as water moves to a customer’s house are removed once it arrives, which will encourage more trust in water’s safety. Finally, as local people are employed in its sales force, it will add to the economy.

As to whether the locals will be able to afford their new water filters, McGovern says the pricing will actually save them money. The developing world is one of the biggest consumers of pricey bottled water, especially Mexico, where the company is putting the finishing touches on its plan.

And if TWI takes off in Mexico, it would be especially fitting. The country also played host to the beginning of the first green revolution, the wave of commercial food production techniques that have proven capable of feeding the world’s billions.

The Water Initiative has so far taken several million dollars in seed funding. It’s on the lookout for \$5 to \$10 million more, and plans to commercialize its products in 2009.