

NGO

Bringing precious water to rural people and villages

Charles Amery

WATER: it's a precious resource and an essential component for every dimension of daily life.

And its supply to the Cambodian capital is an unheralded success on an international scale, through the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority.

A self-sufficient company operating without State subsidies, its remarkable development and progress and proficiency in water supply to the capital made it the winner last year of the prestigious international Stockholm Industry Water Award.

But while this means Phnom Penh has 24-hour, city-wide water supply for its households, the need for clean water is a constant element of every day life in the rural areas of the Kingdom.

There are many NGOs in Cambodia, and overcoming the problems of water and sanitation in rural areas are among their aims.

They pursue missions and programs that dovetail with the poverty cycle, health and nutrition, agriculture and community development.

Ideas at Work (laW) is one Cambodian NGO with a different approach. It produces a strong, simple, Cambodian-made water pump with materials available from local markets.

As well as partnering with other NGOs, laW expands its reach into rural sectors of the provinces by setting up vital distribution lines to bring products to the villages.



A monk helps retrieve water for a rural community.

A product that can help transform the lives of the poor, rural families and communities, which Ideas at Work, a manufacturing company as well as an NGO, says are for easy lifting of abundant water from wells, ponds and slow-moving rivers, which they believe is more important than a small amount of clean drinking water.

laW manufactures and sells water pumps branded under the name ROVAL from its factory in Phnom Penh – which is managed and run by Cambodian staff, some of whom are handicapped – to help their own people.

It is these water pumps, the main product in the field of water, filtration and sanitation, that are helping villagers in the areas of health, more plentiful food, better vegetables and crops, irrigation, less wasted time and healthier animals.

As an award-winning NGO itself, Ideas at Work has worked with major international organisations such as World Vision, the Red Cross, and PLAN International right down to local orphanages and small and big NGOs alike operating in Cambodia.

To Angelique Smit, who first came to Cambodia in 2001 as a pharmacist with Pharmaciens sans Frontieres, only to become disillusioned and look at more direct, hands on ways to help the people, Ideas at Work which she was instrumental in founding in the Kingdom, has become what she likes to term

a "social company" rather than a commercial one. The Ministry for Rural Development says there are no fewer than 800,000 open wells in Cambodia. The benefits and advantages of pumping that water from below – there is an average water table of only eight metres – are enormous.

For water is one of the focal points of village life and it is the many NGOs working in the rural villages and communities through whom 85 percent of the pumps are sold to the people and communities who most need them.

After almost five years of operation with the design, manufacture, continual upgrading of the product and a slowly developing channel of distribution, more than 3500 pumps are now operating in 15 provinces and the aim is for 30,000 by 2020.

After a few months of operation the water from wells using the pumps was biologically tested and confirmed 90 per cent less bacteria in these shallow wells – 10m deep.

But gaining rural people's awareness of the water pump and its



Demonstration pumps show villagers the benefits of clean water.

benefits, getting it to the villagers who need it and establishing the all-important need for distribution channels and direct sales is very much an ongoing role of setting

"Very rarely do villagers travel. They have little need to, and they often see no need for new technology such as water pumps because they are unaware of the benefits. The NGOs see the people and explain the benefits and possibilities of making every day life easier," laW general manager Huy Dara says.

"The necessities the people need they can buy in the local markets. They do not go into the cities. Cities and regional centres send things out to the villages, but they don't send things like water pumps if there's no demand.

"Rural people don't have water pumps on their priority list. Perhaps first a mobile phone, a motorbike, a TV, a watch or then even household appliances. We're open-minded about being commercial, but we are a social company."

Smit became disillusioned with the attitude of her European and US bosses in her previous work positions in Cambodia because she felt they were often dictating from afar, not knowing what was really happening on the ground.

"I started looking at differing ideas on how we could help people. Bring the ideas people had to reality. Someone suggested an alternative water pump. In fact, it wasn't rocket science, being based on a 2000-year-old Chinese model, but the production materials were available locally, which meant that if they broke down, villagers could fix them.

"In 2006, we received a World Bank Development Market Place

award then the idea became serious. We had money for a factory, and since then 3500 pumps have been produced.

"We still need to raise money, then create the demand and sell it directly to the people.

"Other NGOs provide a distribution channel, but that dries up when they end the project. We would like to have a permanent distribution channel to rural areas that is independent from us.

"We are using the water pump to design such a distribution channel for other products. It's a very long lead time, very time-consuming.

"We go back regularly, convincing them of benefits. It's a slow build-up. We also try to work with micro-credit companies, some of which are strong in rural areas.

"It takes time, and we are very happy that NGO partners are getting the product out there and the technology known.

"Seeing and trying is believing! It is difficult for rural people to see the advantages from a leaflet, so when we go to a village we put in a demonstration pump which the villagers can try for themselves.

"We aim to have 30,000 pumps in place by 2020. We will be a Cambodian company, run by Cambodians for Cambodian people."

Ideas at Work, which is also registered with the Ministry of Industry, produces four pump models: the community pump, for up to 20 families; a family pump, for a maximum of three families; a double-handed pump, mainly for schools and children; and a pond pump that lifts water diagonally, not vertically. They sell for as little as \$65, including a well cover.



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