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Water Sustainability: What Governments, Industry and NGOs Can Accomplish Together

A quick look at our nation's philanthropic, industrial and government landscapes reveals dozens of inventive – but separate – initiatives designed to enhance water sustainability and address the clean water crisis in developing countries. But imagine if we were somehow able to distill these efforts into a cohesive approach that would identify and capitalize even a small percentage of the synergies among them. While NGOs and foundations, the private sector, and governments are all working diligently, imagine the impact they could create working in concert.

NGOs and Foundations

There are numerous blue chip NGOs and foundations now directing some of their considerable influence and monetary resources towards addressing global water issues. For example, the World Resources Institute, CERES, the Gates Foundation, One.org, Water.org, the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread, and the Safe Water Partnership have all recently explored or are actively working on solutions to the global water crisis. Water.org – which has the advantage of being associated with well-known actor and philanthropist Matt Damon – is working through local partners to address water issues in places like Bangladesh, Ethiopia, India, the Honduras, Kenya and Uganda.

Water.org doesn't align itself with any single partner organization. Instead, it funds organizations that it believes are able to deliver effective solutions based on local circumstances. Unlike some other efforts, Water.org seeks to ensure a high-level community involvement and ownership over water projects as a way to ensure their viability over the long term. In keeping with the celebrity theme, the late Paul Newman co-founded the highly respected [Safe Water Network](http://SafeWaterNetwork.org). The Safe Water Network was created to establish an innovation ecosystem that develops locally sustainable solutions. "The challenge to providing safe, reliable water to populations in need is immensely complex," explains the organization's CEO, Kurt Soderlund. "Our priority is to organize and manage a network of global expertise that can solve the considerable technical, operating and behavioral challenges impeding scale." PepsiCo, Merck & Co, IBM, IFC, Pentair, Tata and Johns Hopkins University are among the organizations providing expertise to Safe Water Network's initiatives. Its focus is on cost-effective, small-scale water purification facilities that are locally owned and operated.

Private Sector

At the same time, a significant number of large multinational companies like GE, Coca-Cola, Nestle, Talisman Energy, Bloomberg LP, and Proctor & Gamble are providing philanthropic support for these water issues. At the individual company level, GE not only provides water-related aid in places like Ghana through its corporate Foundation and its Water for Humanity program, but it has also committed to reducing its own global water consumption by 25 percent during the next five years. Similarly, companies as diverse as Coca Cola, Talisman Energy, and Levi Strauss are working to solve the world's water crisis while making an impact in their own facilities. In 2007, the UN Secretary-General launched the UN Global Compact's CEO Water Mandate, a public-private initiative designed to assist companies in the development, implementation and disclosure of water sustainability policies and practices. The CEO Water Mandate seeks to build an international movement of committed companies, both leaders and learners. In this spirit, it is open to companies of all sizes and sectors, from all parts of the world.

US Government

The US government is not standing by idly while NGOs, foundations and industry are addressing water issues. To the contrary, the government is leading a number of efforts via agencies: the US Department of State, USAID, the US Department of Commerce, the US Department of Agriculture and the US Environmental Protection Agency.

In early February 2012, the US Department of State convened a roundtable to discuss forming the US Water Partnership. The partnership would seek to knit together divergent water efforts among industry, NGOs and US government agencies. Representatives from companies like GE, Ford and Coca-Cola shared a table with leaders from NGOs at the World Resources Institute, the Voss Water Foundation and senior leaders from the State Department to discuss how we could all work together more effectively under the umbrella of the US Water Partnership.

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How Can All the Players Work Together More Effectively?

I'm a big believer in the power of individual responsibility and action. But clearly, the current approach by NGOs, foundations and industry and government has yet to meet the global water challenge we're all facing. Imagine what we could accomplish if these divergent efforts were able to work together in a way that identified and capitalized on synergies among them. But how could all of these players come together productively? How would they interface and coordinate?

Happily, we're seeing a lot of independent organizations beginning to collaborate in a way that can increase total effectiveness. For example, the US Department of State's US Water Partnership is a great idea that has a lot of potential to amplify many of the individual efforts underway today.

In another positive development, the 2030 Water Resources Group (WRG) is moving forward with its efforts to pull together public and private sector players to create sustainable solutions to water scarcity. After a two-year incubation period at the World Economic Forum, the WRG has recently relocated to the IFC (a member of the World Bank Group).

Finally, it's promising to see foundations like Safe Water Network making it a central part of its mission to create innovation ecosystems that identify and leverage expertise from all players.

Let's build on these new platforms to make sure that one plus one plus one equals safe water for all.