



Newly graduated WASH entrepreneurs prepare to deploy to their target communities. Photo credit: Global Communities Liberia

Quiet Heroes in the Fight against Ebola

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While the Ebola crisis was at its peak in Liberia, a small group of water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) entrepreneurs helped in a significant way by repairing hand pumps in clinics and other health facilities in some of the country’s hardest-hit counties. By restoring access to water — not only for drinking, but also for infection prevention and control — these WASH entrepreneurs ensured that facilities had the resources they needed to promote handwashing and safe hygiene practices that could help combat the spread of the disease.

Liberia’s Bong, Lofa, and Nimba counties were some of the areas most affected during the Ebola crisis. The communities in these counties are largely rural and hard to reach. Roads and infrastructure are poor and government services are limited. In these rural communities access to water and sanitation facilities are extreme challenges. According to the latest data from the WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene, nearly 80 percent of rural Liberians

do not have adequate sanitation facilities. At the same time, 47 percent of rural residents do not have safe drinking water sources.

Market-Driven Solutions

To tackle these issues, in 2010, USAID launched the Integrated Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (IWASH) program, which targeted communities in six counties and parts of Monrovia to improve water supply systems, sanitation facilities, and hygiene practices. To increase water access, rather than just pay contractors to fix wells and pumps, the project team trained local entrepreneurs to fix them and to market their services to communities in the future.

Through this USAID-supported project and the ongoing Partnership for Advancing Community-Based Services (PACS), more than 200 WASH entrepreneurs were recruited and trained to work closely with communities and increase the demand for and the use of WASH facilities and products.

Entrepreneurs were trained in hand pump repair, hand-dug well construction and rehabilitation, latrine construction, and soap making. In addition to providing these services, they also served as vendors for WASH-related equipment, supplying local communities with materials needed to repair hand pumps and latrines. To help the entrepreneurs be successful, they also received training in key business topics including job costing, financial management, profit reinvestment, and marketing.

Once the WASH entrepreneurs graduated they were introduced to their target communities. The entrepreneurs served either the communities where they were from or other nearby communities, ensuring they were familiar with their working environments. As the Ebola crisis worsened in Liberia in 2014, and the need for WASH services grew, these locally based entrepreneurs proved they were more cost-effective and able to more quickly access these clinics than pump mechanics from larger towns farther away.

Establishing Trust with Communities

The entrepreneurs proved their effectiveness working very closely with humanitarian organizations and government counterparts to construct, rehabilitate, and repair protected water sources in their rural communities. They went the extra mile into hard-to-reach areas and as a result of these efforts, community members have grown to trust them.

While the technical training and skills development of the entrepreneurs has been critical to their success, the long-lasting relationships they have built with the residents they serve has been equally important. These relationships — built on cultural understanding, trust, and friendship — are contributing to the long-term sustainability and ownership of communal and individual WASH facilities within these communities.

Esther Moye exemplifies the type of long-lasting relationships that WASH entrepreneurs have with their communities. She was one of the first WASH entrepreneurs trained under the IWASH program. In her small village of Maluquille, she helped construct four latrines and repair multiple hand pumps. Word of her skills got out and she received more contracts with nearby communities to repair their hand pumps.

She describes how people would just stand around with their mouths open in disbelief as she made repairs, as this was not a role traditionally played by women. Esther explains that the training “changed my life.” “Before we were just making charcoal. Now I am able to support my family. I am able to buy clothes, food, and register my children for school. I am also helping my community,” she says.

Leveraging the Private Sector

As the WASH entrepreneurs became established and demonstrated their effectiveness, the project was able to attract private sector donors to support the model. The Coca-Cola Africa Foundation made investments to support the training of an additional 114 WASH entrepreneurs through the WASH Entrepreneur Livelihood and Learning program in Bong, Lofa, and Nimba counties.

With support from ExxonMobil and the National Oil Company of Liberia, an additional 120 new WASH entrepreneurs are being recruited and trained and will be rapidly deployed to yield immediate benefits to communities. At least 50 percent of new recruits are women. In concert with the Government of Liberia and the Ministry of Public Works, these new entrepreneurs will conduct in-depth assessments on WASH facilities at schools, clinics, and in communities that need repairs and rehabilitation. Other key activities under the program include vendor identification and supply chain mapping. In conjunction with PACS, implementer Global Communities will work with entrepreneurs to identify WASH product vendors, companies, and suppliers that are vital to ensure the availability of WASH products at all times within target communities to promote sustainability and ownership.

Having a well-trained cadre of WASH entrepreneurs offers promising potential to provide essential WASH services as Liberia recovers from Ebola and establishes stronger and more sustainable health systems. By providing a market-based model for WASH services, gains made through infrastructure investments and health programming can continue to grow independently even after donor-funded programs are complete. WASH entrepreneurs have demonstrated success by providing localized and affordable services to communities typically left out of the WASH market and through continued training, formalization, and investment, these entrepreneurs can better link community demand and private sector supply for WASH services in Liberia.

By Alex Keimbe, senior technical WASH advisor, Global Communities Liberia



Additional Resources:

- [A Community Approach to Better Public Health in Rural Liberia](#)
- [Global Waters Radio: Piet deVries on Sanitation Behavior Change in Liberia](#)
- [Celebrating Water Heroes \(Photo Essay\)](#)

This article appears in Global Waters, Vol. 9, Issue 1; for past issues of the magazine, visit [Global Waters' homepage](#). For more information on USAID/Liberia, [click here](#).