

Africa's not-so-magic roundabout

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Millions of charity dollars are flowing into water pumps driven by children's roundabouts, but is it money down the drain?

Playpumps International, which provides water pumps for African villages, sounds like a marketing dream. Smiling, playing children, solving Africa's water problems. It is an appealing image and one that has attracted millions of dollars in American government aid, backing from charity groups and high-profile celebrity endorsements. The only problem is it has also been criticised by one of the world's leading water charities as being far too expensive, too complex for local maintenance, over-reliant on child labour and based on flawed water demand calculations. So, are we just buying into yet another feel-good marketing gimmick?



The charity has repeatedly referred to its ambition to build 4,000 Playpumps to bring the "benefit of clean drinking water to up to 10 million people". However, the Sphere Project states that the recommended minimum daily water requirement is 15 litres per person which – based on the pump's capabilities – would require children to be "playing" non-stop for 27 hours in every day to meet the 10 million figure. Under more reasonable assumptions, a Playpump could theoretically provide the minimum water requirements for about 200 people a day based on two hours constant "play" every day – much less than its claimed potential.

WaterAid, one of the world's biggest water charities agrees. It recently issued a statement explaining why it does not support using Playpumps in its projects. It outlines concerns over the high costs, the complexity of the pumping mechanism (making local operation and maintenance difficult), the reliance on child labour and the risk of injury.

It also raises questions over the project's viability – pointing out that children's high spirits to drive the merry-go-round may not be available at times of water demand, ie in the early morning, early evening and during wet weather. It concludes that you could provide four conventional wells with hand pumps for the cost of just one Playpump, and that there are far cheaper and more sustainable ways of providing water without using Playpumps. Some adults in playpump villages found it humiliating to have to push the merry-go-round to get water in the absence of children.

The planned revenue from advertising on the associated water tanks also largely failed to materialise because they were constructed in rural environments.

Save the Children, which was responsible for the installation of dozens of pumps in Mozambique, has been blamed for placing the devices in unsuitable sites and failing to respond to repair requests—at times leaving communities without access to water sources for six months. A report by Mozambique's government indicates that Save the Children failed to test the water quality of many of the sites in which PlayPumps were installed.

The PlayPump has failed in its mission, in part, because it was implemented before they properly explored the appropriateness and viability of the technology. Additionally, the communities in which a PlayPump was installed were rarely consulted on whether they wanted the technology.

According to Amy Costello, the PBS journalist who initially ran the story, PlayPump's supporters saw it as a versatile solution - one that could work in a variety of locations. "But, various parties have told me that they learned that the best approach for bringing clean drinking water to Africa is to offer not just one solution like the PlayPump. Instead, all organisations are now moving to offer a range of water solutions and technologies tailored to the individual needs and circumstances of different villages," Costello said.

Clarissa Brocklehurst, the chief of water, sanitation and hygiene at UNICEF agrees, "We've got to think less about what is the magic bullet and what is the best technology, and more about how to come up with a tailor-made solution that suits the capacity of the people we're trying to help."