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Headline: Kenya project: making safer water to sell carbon credits

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KAKAMEGA – To protect the environment and improve the health of four million people while making a profit is the goal of a Swiss-based company distributing water filters and aiming to sell carbon credits.

Mikkel Vestergaard Frandsen's family firm has invested \$30 million (20.7 million euros) in a programme to distribute 900,000 water purifiers in Kenya's Western Province, which will reduce environmental pollution by avoiding the need to burn wood and boil water.

The technology given free to local people is known as the LifeStraw, which is a plastic kit fitted with a filter that eliminates more than 99 percent of bacteria, viruses and parasites in water from wells and from streams.

In recent months, with the help of 4,000 Kenyan public health workers, the Danish-run Vestergaard Frandsen company equipped almost 90 percent of the 900,000 households in Western province, reaching almost 4.5 million residents.

The aim is to ensure that 60 percent of the households affected no longer have any need to boil their water to purify it and thus reduce the carbon gas emissions, earning Vestergaard Frandsen carbon credits to sell.

The scheme depends on a system of collecting information from each worker who installs a LifeStraw and must transmit, over a mobile phone, the name and photo of the recipient, the number of people in the household and the satellite (GPS) coordinates of the house.

"We're giving every house a water filter and educating in the use of (it) and the need for drinking safe water," Vestergaard Frandsen told AFP. "As a result of this, we anticipate that the use of boiling water will go down. When boiling water reduces, less firewood is burnt and that means less CO2 emissions."

"It's a massive investment for our company. We obviously need a revenue stream. That revenue comes from the reduced boiling water and the reduced burning of firewood. We actually expect to have a CO2 emission reduction for two to 2.5 million tonnes per year which we're going to sell on the voluntary carbon credit market," he added.

"We're a business, and we've been very fortunate to build a business around the opportunity to save lives. It's a full profit enterprise."

In a village on the outskirts of Kakamega, Vestergaard Frandsen carried out a swift tour of inspection, but while the project has been widely welcomed, unexpected difficulties do arise.

Saouda Rajab, 27, took her courage in both hands to ask whether the filtered water acted as a contraceptive.

"Is it true it is used for family planning?" she asked. "Can you show me what's inside (the plastic tube). Old people fear that these wazungu (white people) put something in it to kill us... Those are rumours from the old people."

Vestergaard Frandsen explained that the rumours are groundless and promised to show the filter without its plastic casing within the next two weeks. He then decided to step up his village-by-village awareness campaigns to keep on hammering the message that the Lifestraw has no such side effects and to allay fears.

The company is playing for high stakes. Its financial success depends on the widespread adoption of the kit by the villagers.

The project must also undergo an independent audit carried out by a firm with the approval of the Gold Standard, a label for trade in carbon credits under which LifeStraw is registered.

The audit will "evaluate how much CO₂ would have been produced in the absence of the project, and then the real emissions will be measured once the project is in place," said Emmanuel Fages, an analyst of the carbon market, who accepts that "measuring carbon is not an exact science."

For his part, Vestergaard Frandsen plans to pursue his work on the ground until the audit is carried out.

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"At the end of the year, we will be in a position to measure our 2011 worth in carbon credits, whose market value oscillates between six and 10 euros per tonne," he told AFP, before adding that he has made an advance deal worth 1.8 million tonnes with the US bank JP Morgan Chase.