

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?



As children play, the Playpump's spinning motion pumps underground water into a raised tank. Photograph: FairWater/Public Domain

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Playpumps International, which provides water pumps for African villages, sounds like a marketing dream. Children play on a merry-go-round, and as they do so water is pumped from the ground for storage in an elevated tank.

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 the likes of the Co-op 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? And what does this say about the current state of the aid industry?

In 2006 the US President's Emergency Plan for Aids Relief (Pepfar) announced a \$60m public-private partnership with Playpumps International, with \$10m to directly come from the US government. As well as personal endorsements from both George and Laura Bush, the charity has the celebrity X-factor. Jay-Z raised \$250,000 and DJ Mark Ronson pledged \$1 per album sale to the charity. Large organisations have also been active in their support. The Co-op pledged that for every purchase of Fairbourne Springs mineral water, the company would make a charitable donation to go towards Playpumps. Millions of dollars are flowing, but is it just money down the drain?

In various press releases, interviews and on its website the charity has repeatedly referred to its ambition to build 4,000 Playpumps by 2010 to bring the "benefit of clean drinking water to up to 10 million people". The concept is simple: a merry-go-round is connected to a bore-hole. As children play, the spinning motion pumps underground water into a raised tank.

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 bare minimum water requirements for about 200 people a day based on two hours' constant "play" every day - considerably 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 (\$14,000, excluding drilling), 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.

Paul van Beers of FairWater.org, a water NGO, describes his frustration at the "millions of US dollars wasted" on the scheme. The NGO offered to help Playpumps improve its Afri-pump technology, but didn't receive any reply, he says. He points out that the planned revenue from advertising on the associated water tanks also largely failed to materialise because they were

constructed in rural environments, and he concludes: "Their marketing is perfect, but the final idea does not work."

This is just one example of problems in international water aid. One director of an African water charity speaking on condition of anonymity was scathing about how money was wasted. He described how corruption on the ground was rife, giving the example of how some international contractors paid more than \$1,000 a day by water charities to drill boreholes had little concern for whether drilling was even appropriate, just as long as they kept themselves in a job. He concluded grimly: "If anyone ever told the truth, no one would give us anything." And this is the catch-22 many good charities find themselves in. They can keep quiet and watch money wasted in massive quantities, or expose the waste and risk damaging charitable giving to the sector as a whole.

As a final thought, there are 375,000 handpumps in Africa, but more than 150,000 of these are abandoned due to poor maintenance or poor construction. The solution, therefore, isn't so much about aid but the correct usage money. The aid industry has become ever more market driven, a trend accelerated by an increasing tendency for the private sector to profit on the back of charity giving. The great tragedy is that by being drawn to easily marketable gimmicks, more appropriate and sustainable projects are in ever greater danger of being neglected.

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