

Small Ideas can be Big

by Shelley Dunstone

Have you heard about PlayPumps*? This is quite a remarkable and “feel-good” innovation.

It’s a water pump that is powered by children at play; it doubles as a merry-go-round. It provides access to clean water for remote communities in southern Africa. Spin-offs include improved health, education, gender-equality and economic development.

Instead of children having no time to play because of the need to haul water, they are now encouraged to play, because it *produces* water. The community benefits from clean water and less risk of disease. Children have time to attend school. Women no longer risk injury from transporting heavy containers of water over great distances, and they can use the time saved to better care for their families and start small enterprises.

Students in these communities are no longer fainting in school from thirst. Agricultural Science students can now plant and grow things as part of their training, which was not previously possible because of the lack of water. Girls now get to spend as much time in school as the boys do.

The storage tanks carry advertising billboards that raise revenue to fund maintenance of the pumps. The billboards also provide public health messages, e.g. how to reduce the spread of AIDS/HIV.

Around 900 pumps have been installed across southern Africa.

The insights that I take from this story are

1. Someone has challenged the assumption that these people are just condemned to a hard life. They were willing to tackle a big problem.
2. They didn’t leave it to the authorities to fix.
3. They identified the underlying cause of multiple serious problems.
4. The simplest ideas can be the most powerful.
5. Different people see different things. An engineer invented the machine, then an advertising executive saw how it might be distributed and pay for itself.
6. A small “lever” has made a big difference, enabling these communities to get a foot-hold on the ladder towards a better life.

Now, what is the lever that would make a big difference to the health and living conditions of our own indigenous people living in remote areas?

*You can read more about PlayPumps at www.playpump.org