From our water correspondent

Our water correspondent, Kate Fogelberg, describes the FLOW tool for monitoring the sustainability of water supplies, and its use in Bolivia.

Five years ago, Water for People started to develop a post-construction sustainability monitoring programme

FIVE YEARS AGO, I SAT DOWN with Water For People colleagues and we started to think about how we could develop a post-construction sustainability monitoring programme at Water For People. We wanted something simple and applicable across the then five countries where we were working. After lots of discussion on what we should be monitoring – *How do we do water quality? Are committees important? If water flows on the day of the visit, isn't that good enough?* – it was time to get on with it and do some field testing. Many organizations get bogged down in what to monitor, but we were keen to avoid this paralysis by analysis and set out to field test in Honduras.

We visited 33 communities that first year and 31 of them had water flowing on the day of the visit. Lots of interesting learning occurred that shaped our programming in the region – precisely the point of monitoring!

In addition to collecting data we were interested in seeing if our methodology was feasible

- Rehabilitation projects were two-thirds more likely to have operational problems than those where Water For People provided human resource training in addition to just finance. We now devote a considerable amount of time, money, and training to water committees themselves, association of water committees, and municipal water technicians.
- We found many small system chlorinators not being used by communities and have since modified our approach to water quality in Honduras through piloting different types of technology; encouraging supply chain strengthening by facilitating chlorine availability through the Association of Water Committees; and supporting human resource back-up support through the different support groups, such as the association and the municipality.
- In addition to collecting the actual data, we were also interested in seeing if our methodology was feasible. As we sweated up and down hillsides, sidestepped snakes, and sipped fresh coffee some days and milk straight from the cow's udder other

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days, my backpack included this list everyday:

- A Tablet PC (the grand-daddy of the iPad).
- Car chargers for the PC.
- Hundreds of pieces of paper interviews: interviews for community members, interviews for water committees, back-up copies in case some got wet.
- Clipboards and paper clips.
- The most accurate GPS unit on the planet.
- My SLR digital camera.
- Close to 20 Colilert water quality tests. (These would then be body incubated at night – which means putting 10 ml tubes of sampled water and reagent down your pants, in your socks, or under your armpits to try to get them to reach the temperature necessary for the reagent to work!)
- Chlorine strips.
- Tape and markers to label the water quality tests.
- Pens (note the plural: we would have been out of luck to find ourselves at the end of those 2-hour hikes only to discover we left pens in the cars).
- My flip phone.

Since that first trip, we have monitored arsenic filters in peri-urban India, improved toilets in rural Malawi, school hand-washing stations in Guatemala, public taps in Rwanda, and rainwater harvesting tanks in Bolivia.

While the concept was right, we would often have significant delays in getting the information back to the field. When we collected baseline data on access to water and sanitation in northern Peru in October 2009, I was not able to return the data to partners until May 2010. Seven months to get the information back. Not terribly helpful for local government partners or ourselves to begin planning.

Last month – after years of collecting data the old school way – I was in rural Bolivia training staff and partners on a much-improved data collection tool, FLOW (Field Level Operations Watch). The concept has not changed since we first tested the idea in Honduras years ago: we must understand what happens after the first day water flows. We just now have a much better way to do it. I didn't know what a Droid was five years ago, or if they even existed, but they have revolutionized how we collect, view, and manage data at Water For People.

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Multilingual, permission-based, simultaneous data collection and entry, GPS and camera-included, myself, our staff, our partners, government, and community members themselves can now share with the world with the press of a button or the click of a box, the status of water systems and toilets the world over. The status of thousands of water points

The status of thousands of water points are now transparently available with the click of a mouse

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are now transparently available with the click of a mouse and summaries of strengths and weaknesses displayed on our website (http://www.waterforpeople.org/programs/field-level-operations-watch.html [accessed 27 August 2011]).

If you give money to any organization, ask them how they know if what they do lasts; then ask them to prove it. If you work for an organization doing anything – public, private, or civil society – ask yourself how you know what you are doing lasts; then push yourselves to prove it. Our institutional commitment to monitor has been strong for years. But few organizations were replicating the system. Once we got rid of everything in our backpacks – the backpack included – and began to use technology for good, the interest in FLOW took off. It's now easier than ever to report back on the sustainability of investments. Join the movement!