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Refreshing News on World Water Day

The other day I was talking to Alex Nisichenko, a project associate for IPA who worked on the "Household Clean Water Technology: Valuation, Use & Impact" project in Northern Ghana. He also happens to be the one who took and told me the story behind the above photo he snapped in Tamale—one that I would like to share on behalf of World Water Day.

About a year ago, a prominent organization contacted Alex requesting a photo of rural Ghanaians with their drinking water. In response to their request, Alex sent them the above. The organization loved it and decided they wanted to use it on their website to promote various clean water initiatives—but only under one condition: that the photo would need to be edited so that the water appeared to be less polluted. Their rationale was that the water in the girl's glass to the right was too astonishing, and that visitors to their website would not believe that the murky substance pictured was actually drinking water. But in fact, it is. The photo posted has not been staged or edited. This, believe it or not, is the type of water the residents of villages in Northern Ghana fetch from standing surface water pools every day.

The point here is that most of us don't really appreciate the scope of the unclean water problem. Even the keepers of this prominent website—which tends to be visited by pretty savvy people—figured their visitors would disbelieve the actual photo. That's why we need World Water Day—because even those of us who are pretty informed about development and poverty in general would hardly believe our eyes if faced with the actual quality of water much of the world has to drink.

The fact is that the situation is dire: each day, millions of people draw from their local wells and streams dangerously contaminated water. The water can look much like the stuff in the girl's glass above and to make matters worse, even clear-looking water can be contaminated with microorganisms and cause children to get sick. Each year about 1.8 million children die from diarrheal diseases due to contaminated water—the world's second leading cause of death in children under the age of 6 in the developing world (that's about four thousand children a day!). And yet it is the most preventable if given the right opportunities.

To approach this massive problem, IPA has conducted randomized trials in collaboration with researchers from Harvard and UC Berkley to find cost-effective methods of providing safe

water and reducing childhood diarrhea and waterborne illness using dilute chlorine solution. Turns out, it wasn't the treatment that was the problem; it was *how* people we using the treatment. What they found was that although dilute chlorine solutions were known to reduce diarrhea by around 30%, less than 10% of households were actually using it. The researchers realized they needed to test ways that would boost the adoption of chlorine to treat unclean water. To do this, they decided to place chlorine dispensers near water sources. The results were more than encouraging. Randomized tests conducted after the dispensers were installed showed that over 60% of households in communities with a chlorine dispenser, had a detectable level of chlorine in their drinking water.

These dispensers cost as little as $0.30 per person per year and, at scale, could improve the health of millions and save up to 150,000 lives per year. You can view a step-by-step guide to how the dispensers actually work here.

If all this talk about water has made you thirsty, here is some refreshing news: The SafeWater Program seeks to protect 5 million people around the world from unsafe drinking water by 2015 through the provision of dilute chlorine solutions.

March 22, 2011