



Case Study: Water Access

A volunteer development worker is working for a non-governmental organization (NGO) in Malawi.

In rural areas of Malawi, access to clean water for drinking, cooking, and cleaning is a big problem. Many other NGOs from Canada, the USA, and other countries visit occasionally, building new wells as charity—but these wells are not invincible, and they frequently break down within a year of use. These wells are also constructed ad hoc, so the government does not know where and when they're being built nor does it necessarily have the resources to repair them. As a result, the worker sometimes finds that broken wells exist within fifty feet of one another, where two different NGOs have built two different wells and both have broken down.

The worker has only two months. They start out their work by visiting rural areas to try to map water access points and well status, but visiting these rural areas by motorbike on poorly maintained roads is taking too long.

One day, the worker notices that across the road from their main office is a government Community Health office. The worker visits the office to learn more about the services and realizes that community health practitioners are regularly dispatched to Malawian communities to assess the community's services needs. They carry a standard survey on a clipboard, asking questions like “How many pregnant women are in the community?” or “Does the community have local clinics?”

The development worker gets an idea. The community health surveys are already providing extensive coverage of Malawi's rural communities. The development worker asks the Community Health Office to append an item to the survey asking about the location, number, and type of water access points in each community. The office agrees, and the data starts flowing: this particular region of Malawi now has a regularly refreshed source of information about water access without additional costs.

(Based on a story from Engineers Without Borders – Canada.)

Key takeaway: Understanding the system is an important way to find leverage, gaining a lot of traction with only a little effort.