

Toilets can be complicated

In developing communities like the Cascas region in Peru, latrines are associated with poverty, so they don't get used much, as Steve Meininger discovered a few years ago. Many nongovernmental organizations have made the mistake of assuming "if they build them, they will come." But the situation is complicated: people prefer to defecate in the open air for a variety of reasons, such as cultural taboos, superstitions, an association with poverty and social stigma from cleaning the latrines. Sanitation solutions require culturally sensitive creativity and partnerships with the local community, as Water For People (WFP) has discovered. As co-chair of our annual WFP campaign, Steve got to travel to Peru in 2014 to see WFP's groundbreaking work up close.

Describing the trip as "both inspirational and humbling," Steve wrote about his experience in a blog post [published by the CH2M Foundation](#) and WFP. Here is an excerpt:

"My first clue about what lay in store for us came upon our arrival in Trujillo (Peru's third-largest city), when the power was out across the city for nearly 18 hours. The power outage did not seem to affect the locals who went about their normal activities. This was the "big city" and most of WFP's focus was in two regions, one of which is Cascas, a few hours' drive from Trujillo.

In a briefing with WFP staff, we learned that Peru has approximately 7.5 million people living in rural areas, but only 25 percent have access to drinking water. And here, sanitation is defined merely as access to a safe, clean place with a separation between humans and waste. Not counting latrines, only 7.7 percent of people in Peru have access to sanitation. It is remarkable to understand just how many people don't have access to clean water and sanitation. ([Help us #changethat.](#))

We traveled to rural communities such as LaCienega, where we visited a water treatment plant supported by WFP that served 95 families. In La Palen we visited a 28-family community that recently obtained access to treated drinking water and are piloting a micro water meter program. In La Constancia, 35 families get their drinking water from irrigation ditches, tainted with animal and human waste. They made an impassioned plea to WFP to help their community.

I greatly appreciate the fact that WFP requires everyone involved in their projects to have "skin in the game." WFP provides 40 percent of the funding and requires local government to match that, while community members must contribute 20 percent, primarily in labor. WFP trains locals to operate and maintain their systems and monitor them for 10 years after they are installed. Each system serves as a model for replication in other communities. The local water committee, a key component in the WFP model, provides local ownership by managing construction, operations, maintenance, expansion, billing and other activities to ensure the project's long-term sustainability.

Education is key to WFP's success. One significant challenge is finding water professionals with the necessary training who are willing to work in rural areas. At the national university, WFP supports a program to train post-graduate students in water-related areas. Through its WASH program, WFP educates elementary school children about sanitation and personal hygiene and the program has resulted in significant drops in illness and disease.

We received a warm reception wherever we stopped, as families invited us into their homes and freely shared their stories. It was clear to see how much they appreciate what WFP does for them. And they are amazed that people around the world actually care about them and their little communities.

At the same time, though, it was abundantly clear how much work remains. But I became more convinced than ever that WFP is going about it the right way. During our travels, we saw abandoned outhouses, remnants of other efforts to bring sanitation to the area – but those driving the effort appeared to just throw money at the problem. Commendable in their intent, but lacking in execution. The WFP model is thoughtful and sustainable. They provide the necessary training and resources so that

communities can continue their efforts long after the staff – deeply committed and caring people, I might add – have left.

WFP does an outstanding job of leveraging the money provided to them, returning several times the investment through the multiplier effect of their efforts.”

Learn how [your donation is multiplied tenfold](#), and help other communities throughout the world solve their water and sanitation problems [by donating to WFP](#).