



## How to build community.

# How to make access to safe water more sustainable – Part 2

### Summary keywords

water, women, climate change, health, community, business, WaterAid, challenges, international, agreement,

### Speakers

Jake Lloyd, Allison Liu, Kathryn Pharr

## Episode 18: How to make access to safe water more sustainable – Part 2

### Jake Lloyd 1:17

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Water. It's very often why a community is where it is. By a river, a lake, a borehole. However, climate change means that some parts of the world are seeing more floods, while others are seeing more droughts. This unpredictability is making it increasingly difficult for many communities to access enough safe water for drinking and other purposes. And it's posing a growing challenge to the women and girls around the world who often bear the responsibility of collecting water for their households.

So in this episode, we're thinking about drinking water, health, climate change and women.

### Kathryn Pharr 1:07

The amazing work that these women did changed minds in their community about the role of women, so it has made life better for everyone in the community.

### Jake Lloyd 1:18

That's the voice of Kathryn Pharr. She is a Senior Policy Advisor on International Climate Action at WaterAid UK. Shortly you'll hear her explain how in Bangladesh the challenge of accessing safe drinking water in a changing climate has led to an opportunity for a community to not only access safe water but also to improve gender equality.

But first, I spoke to a health coach called Allison Liu, and she told me why having access to enough safe drinking water is so crucial for all of us. She told me that our bodies are approximately 60 to 75 per cent water, and that water is so important for the health of our kidneys that frequent dehydration, even if it's mild, may lead to permanent kidney damage. She also explained that if we become dehydrated, our brains are unable to function properly.

### **Allison Liu 2:18**

70 to 80 per cent of our brain is water. So when we don't have adequate water, then we can't pull our thoughts together or we're more likely to feel a bit confused and a bit fuzzy. And so if we want to be productive and think clearly, then making sure to be drinking enough water is really important.

Actually, it's one of the first things, in a sense, that I would recommend if you want to do something that can really help support your brain. Actually, just make sure to drink enough water. I recommend, as well, just getting a lovely large glass of water maybe first thing in the morning. It kind of wakes up the liver and the kidneys and that kicks in the detoxification processing going on in the body. It's a lovely way to start the day.

### **Jake Lloyd 3:13**

So every second of every day, our bodies are hard at work, keeping us alive and well. And water plays a crucial role in this. But according to the World Health Organization, about a quarter of the world's population don't have access to enough safe and affordable drinking water. Instead, millions of people have to work hard to obtain even small amounts of water from sources that are often contaminated. With that in mind, let's hear from today's guest, Kathryn. She began by giving me an indication of just how long it can take people to collect water in some parts of the world.

### **Kathryn Pharr 3:34**

To have a basic water supply means the collection time, including queuing, for a round trip, can't be more than half an hour. And yet we do see that it's commonly more than half an hour in many places around the world. In some places you're queuing for safe water, right? It's clean water. It's been treated. So you're 45 minutes from the nearest point, but you know you're getting good water. That's one category. Then, of course, there is a different category. Not only do you have a long collection time, but in some of these places the water quality is quite poor. This is not water that's really fit to drink or use for cooking or, even in some cases, to water plants. But it's the only source of water that's available to them. And so there's a further question of when they get home, are they able to boil the water or do something to make it safe? Or are they having to drink unsafe water? And of course, I don't know if you have ever carried a jerry can full of water, but they're very, very heavy. And so it's very physically taxing to carry all of this back. And for some of the women in some of our communities, it's many kilometres that they're walking back.

### **Jake Lloyd 5:09**

And this time and effort can have many knock-on effects on the lives of those who have to do it, particularly women and children.

### **Kathryn Pharr 5:16**

We know stories of girls who aren't able to go to school because of the length of time - and sometimes little boys as well - the time it takes to get the water means that there's not time for school. It takes up time that women could, you know, be doing other things or it adds pressure to them. If they have sick family members they have to care for, they might need even more water for those family members. But it also means for women who are pregnant or breastfeeding, who are in a situation where they actually need more water, and yet they're probably not able to collect that additional water and they might be sacrificing the water they need, to try to give it to other members of the family.

### **Jake Lloyd 6:07**

So that gives a sense of the challenge. But what about the solutions? Well, Kathryn told me this fascinating story from Bangladesh. It's that Bangladesh is a low-lying country that is particularly at risk from rising sea levels. These rising sea levels can result in the contamination of freshwater supplies by the salty seawater; something known as saline intrusion. WaterAid - which is an international NGO that's active in the country and, as you might expect, is focused on water, sanitation and hygiene - along with a local NGO called Rupantar, decided to look for groups of women in the country who were eager to work with them to build local solutions to this challenge. And that's where one Bangladeshi lady called Gita Roy comes in. As a direct result of climate change there was no safe source of drinking water in Gita's village. So prior to this project, her daily chores included collecting water for herself and her 14 family members, which was obviously a time-consuming and exhausting task. And Kathryn told me that these are not the only challenges Gita experienced.

### **Kathryn Pharr 7:27**

When she got married early and wanted to continue essentially high school, not only did she have to ask her husband permission, and he wanted to support her in that, he then had to ask the rest of his family and then they had to ask the community leaders for her to be able to do this.

### **Jake Lloyd 7:49**

But when Gita heard about this potential water project, she was really keen to get involved. So at her invitation, WaterAid and Rupantar came to the village, did a climate assessment with the community, worked out what kind of a water plant would best suit that community, and offered to build it and to support the women who would use it.

### **Kathryn Pharr 8:12**

We will train you on how to do the business and will train you on how to run the plant. But you have to be the ones to convince the committee and the local community that this is a good idea because if they don't buy into it, this isn't going to work. So they took the initiative and they led that work. It took them several months, but they were able to get those minds changed and they really talked to people about, you know, 'This is what the drinking water plant will mean. We as a community will have one in our village. We won't

have to be spending all this time, the water quality will be better.'

### **Jake Lloyd 8:53**

So Gita formed a group with ten other women and they began to advocate for the necessary community agreement for a water treatment plant that would make salt water safe to drink. Some in the community felt that women shouldn't be business leaders, but the group was determined and they went from door to door explaining the benefits of the project. Eventually, the community agreed to the project and they were able to get started. And here's a few more of the logistics that were involved in getting it going.

### **Kathryn Pharr 9:28**

So they each needed to raise about €158, and they rented the land on a 15-year lease. We helped them set up a company and creating a business plan. And so for the first time they were actually able to access loans because they were set up as a business. That's a real challenge, right, is originally if you've got community members who have a great idea, a lot of the women aren't in a position to be taken seriously to get a loan.

### **Jake Lloyd 9:55**

As Kathryn was explaining all this, I was very impressed. But I did wonder about the water treatment technology that the group would be helping to manage.

That sounds amazing. Reverse osmosis. Was that the name you said?

### **Kathryn Pharr 10:09**

That is the name I said yes.

### **Jake Lloyd 10:11**

It sounds very complicated to my ears anyway. How difficult is it to train novices, I suppose, in maintaining it? And if part of it breaks or a new part is needed, how is that sourced?

### **Kathryn Pharr 10:29**

So reverse osmosis is essentially you take the saline water and essentially you separate the impurities out from it. So, you're right that it's not about training people to be experts. When I was talking about the maintenance operation, they start with a two-year contract to the company that would be able to come in if certain parts break. So there's some things that the women can do when things don't work, to fix them. And there are some things where they'll need to call on the experts that they've signed up with to come and give a change. And I guess the example I would give if you drive a car is the difference between changing your own oil versus putting in a new transmission.

### **Jake Lloyd 11:19**

The ongoing costs of something like this then, would it be covered by WaterAid or is the government involved in this? Or is it local people funding this?

### **Kathryn Pharr 11:31**

There is a charge for the water but it's not very much. They had to have a business plan that would show that they would be able to cover the operation and maintenance needs through the revenue that they've generated. And they've been successful enough that the women have actually gotten returns on their investment. So they're doing very well with that.

### **Jake Lloyd 11:55**

I think we in the NGO, international development world have a tendency of telling a story of this really impressive thing that we've done, but overlooking the challenges involved in doing it and maintaining it. And actually, there's a lot of lessons in thinking about those challenges. So I just wonder, what have been the big challenges in a project like this, that perhaps there can be lessons learned from as and when something like this is implemented elsewhere?

### **Kathryn Pharr 12:28**

So even after Gita Roy came and said, 'I'm interested', it wasn't the next day, right, that everyone agreed to the drinking water plant. It really did take months for the community to, after the agreement had been that the drinking water plant was needed, that agreement was, 'Okay, fine, we will let the women run the plant, in order to get the plant'. That's a really long timeline. And I think, to be honest, particularly donors often think, 'Oh, well, you've done it one place so you can replicate it somewhere else.' And that can absolutely be true. But, you know, we had an amazing group of women who really wanted to see this happen. And if you don't have the community buy-in and you don't have the leaders in the community who want to do and own the work, it's not going to be successful.

### **Jake Lloyd 13:31**

The plant opened in 2020, and many people from the surrounding area attended the opening ceremony. Unfortunately, I've not been able to speak directly to Gita for this episode, but I can quote her. She said in Tearfund's Footsteps magazine: 'I struggle to find words to describe what I felt at that moment. Swarms of people came to our plant throughout the day to collect water, and I could see all the hard work coming to fruition. Having my own identity, earning my own income, and not depending on anyone for my needs is very satisfying.' So that's what Gita had to say. Today, the plant serves nine villages and it's become increasingly profitable and efficient. But that's not all that it's done, as Kathryn explains.

### **Kathryn Pharr 14:22**

The amazing work that these women did changed minds in their community about the role of women. So prior to this, many, many people had felt that women shouldn't be in business, they shouldn't own businesses. But, this has been so successful and it's made life better for everyone in the community. And so many of the women who have been involved in it have taken the proceeds that they've gotten, and they've decided to start other businesses. So whether that's buying a sewing machine and starting a tailoring business and bringing on another young woman in the community to help with that. Gita Roy has gone into

local politics and was elected at the council election back in 2022. So you can see there's just a lot of energy and change. And of course, the health of the community is much better and the doctors are specifically prescribing that families use the water at the drinking plant to keep them from having diarrhoea issues and other waterborne disease problems. So it's really been a very holistic community solution that's really given everyone a lot more. But it has also really empowered the women in that community.

### **Jake Lloyd 15:49**

Finally, I asked Kathryn what message she has for anyone listening to this who'd like to do something similar to Gita Roy where they live.

### **Kathryn Pharr 15:58**

I think it's important to know that there are resources out there. There are a lot of people who want to support you in the work that you need to do to have the access that you need and to be climate resilient. But some of those people don't know how to find you. So, don't lose heart. I think the bit of the story I didn't tell is how long Gita Roy wanted to fix this problem before she heard of a solution, which was the project that WaterAid was doing. So, always be on the lookout and listening, and tell people the kind of solution you want to do. Know that there will be people out there who want to help you make that happen.

### **Jake Lloyd 16:52**

So that was Kathryn Pharr, Senior Policy Advisor on International Climate Action at WaterAid UK.

And that's almost it for this episode. Before we go, you can help support this show by making a small monthly donation on our Patreon page. Just visit [patreon.com/arukahnetwork](https://patreon.com/arukahnetwork). You can read and download every edition of Tearfund's Footsteps magazine at [learn.tearfund.org](https://learn.tearfund.org), including editions on Safe drinking water and Communicable diseases. You can catch up on previous episodes of How to build community online or in your podcast player. Just search 'How to build community'. Finally, if you've got some feedback on this show or maybe suggestions for future interviewees, then you can reach me by email [jake@arukahnetwork.org](mailto:jake@arukahnetwork.org).

But that's it for this episode. Until next time. Bye for now.

Tearfund, 100 Church Road, Teddington, TW11 8QE, United Kingdom.  
☎ +44 (0)20 3906 3906 ✉ [publications@tearfund.org](mailto:publications@tearfund.org) [learn.tearfund.org](http://learn.tearfund.org)

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