

When my son served in the Army Reserve with a unit in Denver that consisted of veterinarians and food technicians, one year the group was sent to Belize to vaccinate dogs against rabies. Once there, the animal docs realized that a bigger problem was the demodex mite that proliferates in neglected, stressed animals; moreover, a regimen of spaying and neutering was desperately needed for the unkempt, half-starved and feral, dog population. Locals informed them that the life expectancy of these animals was two years. “They have a couple of litters of puppies—and then they die of starvation.” Since the program under which the US group operated did not allow for spaying and neutering, the would-be do-gooders found that their treatment efforts “only made matters worse.”

I have heard similar stories from Peace Corps volunteers, Doctors without Borders, food-aid distributors and so forth. In each instance, a program sprang to life designed by an armchair traveler with good intentions but unwilling or unable to address local conditions much less rogue governments, dictatorships, rebel forces. Volunteers sallied forth with high expectations only to be met with insurmountable problems, unmanageable conditions and, more often than not, capture or even loss of life.

One boondoggle is the 1980s highly-publicized race to provide the world’s poor with “safe” drinking water. One target was India, where rivers and lakes are notoriously contaminated by raw sewage and industrial effluent. Underground water, the reasoning went, had not come in contact with human-made pollutants; hence, it must be pure. “So sure of this were the engineers and public health professionals behind the campaign that they often didn’t even run basic tests for poison in the water as the wells were sunk,” writes Fred Pearce in *When the Rivers Run Dry*.

Now the truth has come to haunt us. Millions of drinkers from wells sunk by the UN and other aid agencies suffer the symptoms of fluoride poisoning. Turns out, fluoride is a common component of the granite rocks that underlie much of India. As water tables fall, villagers sink their wells ever deeper and ever closer to the bedrock. From Assam in the east to Gujarat in the west, from Tamil Nadu in the south to Kashmir in the north, “It’s a huge time bomb,” writes Pearce. The Rural Development Foundation in Delhi guesses that sixty million people may be affected. “And in many areas, there is really no solution.” The fluoride crises in bound to worsen as the groundwater crises itself deteriorates, Pearce quotes Tushar Shah of the International Water Management Institute at Gujarat.

India is not alone. China is estimated to have more than a million victims. “From Chile to Ethiopia to Uzbekistan, similar stories are waiting to be told,” writes Pearce. Children were initially misdiagnosed as suffering from rickets, but when cattle went lame in nearby Tilaipani, a young researcher diagnosed the problem as fluoride poisoning. “As [children] grow, it becomes worse and they are crippled,” Pearce quotes Ravi Shankar Tiwary.

As if the fluoride disaster weren’t bad enough, an even worse problem has appeared with arsenic poisoning from water drawn by tube wells. “Tens of millions of people across Bangladesh and western India are drinking well water laced with concentrations of arsenic that will eventually kill them.” Pearce observes that the arsenic began in the rocks of the Himalayan Mountains but was eroded by great rivers like the Ganges and the Brahmaputra and washed downstream over millions of years. The toxic metal accumulated in the muds of the floodplains and deltas that

make up most of Bangladesh. There it stayed undisturbed, “until humans in the past thirty years began to pump water out of the mud for drinking, and the water brought the arsenic with it. Tube wells sunk to the depth of between 60 and 300 feet contain the most, notes Pearce, adding that, “catastrophically, this is the level to which most tube wells have been sunk.”

This silent epidemic is stalking a majority of Bangladesh’s 68,000 villages, where virtually every backyard has a tube well. It typically takes a decade for the first symptoms to appear, but already tens of thousands of Bangladeshis have developed the skin lesions and cancers typical of the affliction. Many have died. In 1998, the World Bank advanced \$32 million for an immediate cleanup, but the Bangladeshi government has spent less than seven million of it. Still, Pearce hesitates to blame local bureaucrats. “The truth is that thousands of people are still being poisoned by tube wells sunk with aid money from the British and other governments, from charities, and from UN agencies like UNICEF, which sunk the first 900,000 wells.” In the 1980s, tens of millions of tube wells were sunk around the world, he observes.

In no area has well-meaning aid more catastrophically failed than in advancing family health in developing countries, and this includes family planning. Seven billion people now inhabit this earth; 2025 will be the year that surpasses eight billion. Every seven days a city goes up the size of Seattle. We live at a time of runaway growth in human and food-animal populations. As for the dogs for which my veterinarian son shares his devotion to Wyoming’s wildlife: Dogs have aided humans for thousands of years, providing protection, companionship, and hunting assistance. Today dogs are routinely eaten by people desperate for sustenance.