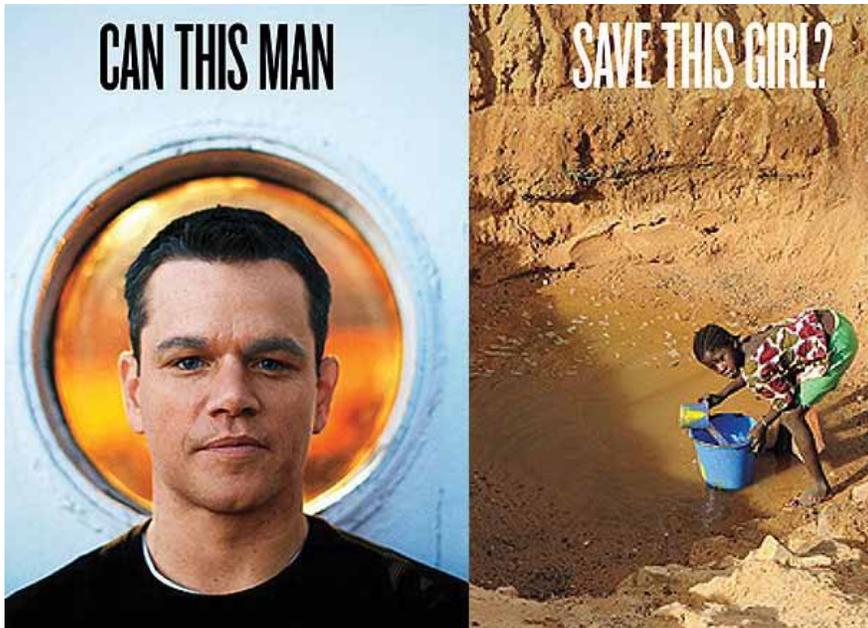


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by Ellen Mcgirt

Can Matt Damon Bring Clean Water To Africa?

The inside story of Matt Damon's bold yet sane plan to use his celebrity and smarts to help attack one of the globe's great crises.



Matt Damon, water warrior. He's not that interested in fancy galas as a way to raise money. "That seems very analog," he says. | In the Dogon region of Mali, a girl from the small village of Songhe scoops up water from a pit that has been dug deep into a dried-up riverbed. Mali faces continual water shortages, despite a rich aquifer. | Photographs by Damon Winters/The New York Times/Redux pictures (Damon); Stuart Franklin/Magnum (Girl)

Once upon a time, Matt Damon went for a long walk in rural Zambia. The devoted family man and method philanthropist was accompanying a 14-year-old Zambian girl who had no idea that her hiking companion was an Academy Award-winning international heartthrob.

The walk came toward the end of a 10-day African journey, a systematic primer on the complexities of the continent's extreme poverty that had been organized for Damon by staffers from his friend Bono's ONE campaign. Damon was on a quest to understand what it meant to be really, really poor. "It was like a mini course in college," he says. Every day brought a different subject: urban AIDS, microfinance, education, and, finally, water. While walking with the young teen on her hour-long trudge to collect water for her family, something clicked. "We talked the whole time [through a translator]. When I asked her what she wanted to do when she grew up -- 'Do you want to stay here?'" he says, pointing to the memory of the dusty

village -- "she got shy all of a sudden." As they returned, both toting 5-gallon jugs of water filled at the well, she finally confessed her dream: to go to the big city, Lusaka, and become a nurse. Damon recalled his dreams at the same age, when he and best friend Ben Affleck were plotting their way from Boston to casting agents in New York. That connection opened the door for Damon. "I remembered so well the feeling of being young, when that whole world of possibility was open to you."

But while Damon's dream was made possible by Amtrak, the girl's was possible only because somebody drilled a borewell near her home -- and, yes, an hour's walk for water is good news in lots of places in the world. Nearly 1 billion souls lack access to clean water; three times that number lack access to proper sanitation. "This is not something that most 14-year-olds have to go through," says Damon, 40. Without access to the water, his companion would have been unable to go to school and would likely have been forced into a precarious fight for life, spending her days scavenging for often-filthy water in unhealthy and unsafe environments. "Now she can hope to be a nurse and contribute to the economic engine of Zambia," he says. "Of all the different things that keep people in this kind of death spiral of extreme poverty, water just seemed so huge." He pauses. "And it doesn't have to be."

Damon tells me this story on a rainy spring day in Manhattan, after a full schedule of board meetings for Water.org, the charity he cofounded in 2009, three years after his Zambia trip, with longtime water expert, and now dear friend, Gary White. It has been a long day but a good one, and Damon has more news to share. He checks his watch. "I have to pick up my

daughter from school. Come along and we'll keep talking," he tells me. As we make our way from a conference room at McKinsey in Midtown (a board member works there) to a car waiting on the street, I watch passersby light up in recognition and try to catch his eye. In spite of his attempt to blend in -- Damon is wearing glasses, a splash of whiskers, and a Panavision baseball cap -- he is unmistakable. And he never fails to return a smile. "Clearly my strong suit is and will be trying to get people to care about this issue," he says of his primary role. "Our vision is clean water and sanitation for everyone, in our lifetime ..." he trails off. "So we better get to work."

For all his star power, though, Damon is more than just the pretty face of Water.org. He has turned himself into a development expert. This would seem like an obvious and necessary first step for someone embracing the global water crisis as a personal mission. But, in fact, it's highly unusual for a celebrity to dive this deep into a problem this daunting. Whether talking microfinance strategy with rural bankers, giving detailed reports from the field at the annual Clinton Global Initiative, or personally thanking donors like PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi, Damon has quietly developed the cred of a program geek. "If you want to understand how this works," he says, sounding more like an anthropologist than a celebrity spokesperson, "there is no substitute for going there and talking to people in their homes." It's an approach he comes by honestly. His mother, a professor of early childhood education, spent part of her summers living with local families in Guatemala and Mexico, attending language school in preparation for her field research. She brought her impressionable teenage son along. "She specialized in nonviolent conflict resolution," Damon explains. In war-torn areas like El Salvador, she interviewed children, studied their artwork, and documented their trauma. "So I'd seen extreme poverty at an early age," he says. "I knew what it was, and I always cared about it." He has replicated her research process, immersing himself in the business of social enterprise until he found the cause that he felt passion for -- water.

Damon reads as equal parts hardworking, ambitious, grounded, and caring, the kind of celebrity you'd want your son to be if you had a son who could get both the girl and the point of fame. He's a son who'd make a mother proud. "She doesn't say it quite that way," he says. "It's not the way she talks. She says, 'I affirm him.' Hang on a sec." As he hops out of the car to go pick up the eldest of his four daughters, a charming tween who will never have to fetch water for her family, he smiles and looks affirmed.

THE BUSINESS OF philanthropy is a difficult one, often as challenging to decipher as the problems it aims to solve. But Water.org is the smart and careful merger of two capable organizations: Damon's H2O Africa, which he founded as a way to funnel money to well-managed NGOs in Africa; and Gary White's WaterPartners, a two-decades-old group that had developed a series of highly innovative and counterintuitive approaches to water access. WaterPartners' strategy had less to do with digging wells -- which, if maintained poorly, can break down and leave a place in worse shape than before -- and more to do with encouraging communities to participate in the creation and ownership of water and sanitation systems that function as mini utilities. These issues, known as WASH in philanthropic circles -- water, sanitation, and hygiene -- are among the least glamorous of all support efforts, yet are the most likely to lift a community out of poverty if done right. Think of toilets, hygiene education, pump maintenance, faucets, and a nascent form of self-government that literally takes a village. "A community has to invest in the project themselves to manage it," insists White, 48. "It's bottom-up, not top-down."

The merger involved a leap of faith for both White and Damon, though neither describes it that way. In a world where celebrities routinely rain shame upon their personal brands with public meltdowns, sex tapes, or undeclared children, and where professional philanthropists come



In 2009, Damon and Gary White cofounded Water.org. That same year, they visited this town in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Their initial trips into the field included a foray to South African slums while Damon was shooting *Invictus*. | Courtesy of Water.org

under fire for spending a lot to do very little, each had a difficult judgment call to make. Their long courtship started as collaboration and ended in partnership. “We were a grant recipient of Matt’s before we merged,” White says. “He was clearly looking for the same things we were and had developed such knowledge on the subject.” Damon had studied White’s innovations, particularly a microfinance instrument known as WaterCredit, as he brought himself up to speed on the water crisis. “Gary is the expert. I’ve come to trust him implicitly and value his input above all others,” says Damon. “When you talk to Gary, you understand that we can solve this thing.” The two were also in sync on the practical aspects of working together. Both willingly gave up the names of their organizations, and neither fussed about titles, credit, or where their names should go on websites or programs. In separate conversations, both men declare themselves lucky to have found the other. “He’s not what I expected at all,” they say of each other, sounding similarly surprised.

Water.org is on track to raise \$10 million in 2011, up from \$4 million in 2010. The primary use of that money is not as a handout to well drillers. Rather, Water.org tends to negotiate deals between microfinance institutions and communities. It might help a village get access to a local banker, who will then lend money to build systems that tap into a well, or a previously inaccessible water or sanitation grid. Water.org may guarantee the loan, but repayment falls to the villagers, who work together to manage the water supply and organize credit payments.

“By using local capital markets to develop the projects, people get access to the credit system,” White says. “The villagers own the project at the end of the exercise. They’re proud of it, and they have done it themselves.” Water.org claims that this approach has allowed it to help more than 315,000 people gain access to clean-water systems that are reliable and maintained.

That leveraged success, combined with Damon’s celebrity, explains why donations to Water.org are on the rise and why it has earned the attention of institutional funders. “It was clear that Gary had developed a really high impact and interesting play in the world of water access and sanitation,” says the Skoll Foundation’s David Rothschild of its decision to back the organization in 2009. “We were looking for something that would scale, and this was it.”

“**THIS IS A PROBLEM** we can solve,” says White. We are sitting in his sparse office in downtown Kansas City, Missouri, when he takes from his windowsill a plastic bottle of dirty water collected from his latest trip to Ethiopia, and shakes it into a chocolate-milk froth. “This is what they were drinking,” he says. Radiating warmth and calm, he shows me pictures of projects, of happy children near wells, each a story of heartbreak and redemption. These are, of course, the kinds of images we always see when asked to think about the water crisis. But behind me is a whiteboard, where White is trying to sketch out the future of Water.org. “We are looking for the next WaterCredit,” he explains.

White’s long path to WaterCredit, and to Water.org, began, as the best things often do, over a meal with good friends. In the

EVERY 20 SECONDS, A CHILD DIES FROM A WATER-RELATED DISEASE.

ABOUT 80% OF SEWAGE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES IS DISCHARGED UNTREATED.

MORE PEOPLE HAVE CELL PHONES THAN ACCESS TO A DECENT TOILET.

3.6 MILLION PEOPLE DIE EACH YEAR FROM WATER-RELATED DISEASES.

LESS THAN 1% OF THE WORLD’S FRESH WATER IS READILY ACCESSIBLE FOR DIRECT HUMAN USE.

NEARLY 1 BILLION PEOPLE LACK ACCESS TO SAFE WATER.

MILLIONS OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN SPEND SEVERAL HOURS A DAY COLLECTING WATER FROM DISTANT, OFTEN POLLUTED SOURCES.

late 1980s, he was working for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) as an engineering specialist on projects in Latin America and the Caribbean. “Someone said, ‘Your life should be about finding the intersection of the world’s greatest need and your greatest passion,’” he tells me. “That always seemed right to me.” But in order to sit for his professional engineer’s exam, he had to give up his relief work and join a stateside engineering firm. “I was devastated,” he says. So, the day after Thanksgiving in 1990, he invited 100 friends to the local Knights of Columbus hall in Kansas City to enjoy a donated catered meal and a keg of Boulevard beer. He also showed them a slide show of the work he’d done with CRS. “We raised \$4,000,” he recalls with a smile. That money seeded a project that he started in El Limon in Honduras. The next year, another dinner and another project. A series of annual dinners grew into a fledgling enterprise he called WaterPartners, which became big enough

to attract institutional investment. One of the first such grants was for \$100,000, from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation.

Still, even after White had led dozens of projects, he remained frustrated. “Projects -- everyone’s projects -- were failing at a really high rate.” Communities had broken wells or faucets that villagers were unable to repair, or the wells produced water more dangerous than that of the filthy rivers that flowed nearby. There were also few, if any, sanitation projects. “In the ‘80s and ‘90s, the approach was really supply-driven -- ‘We are here to give you your water project,’” he says. Dig a well, put up a plaque, take a picture, and scam. “People were designing projects for people, not with them.” White came to understand that community engagement (a term rendered almost meaningless by politicians, major brands, and social-networking companies) is a life-or-death strategy in the developing world. “There needs to be a water committee. At least 80% of the community needs to sign up and raise money for the project, participate in its construction and up-keep,” he says. That’s how a project turns from top-down charity to bottom-up sustainability.

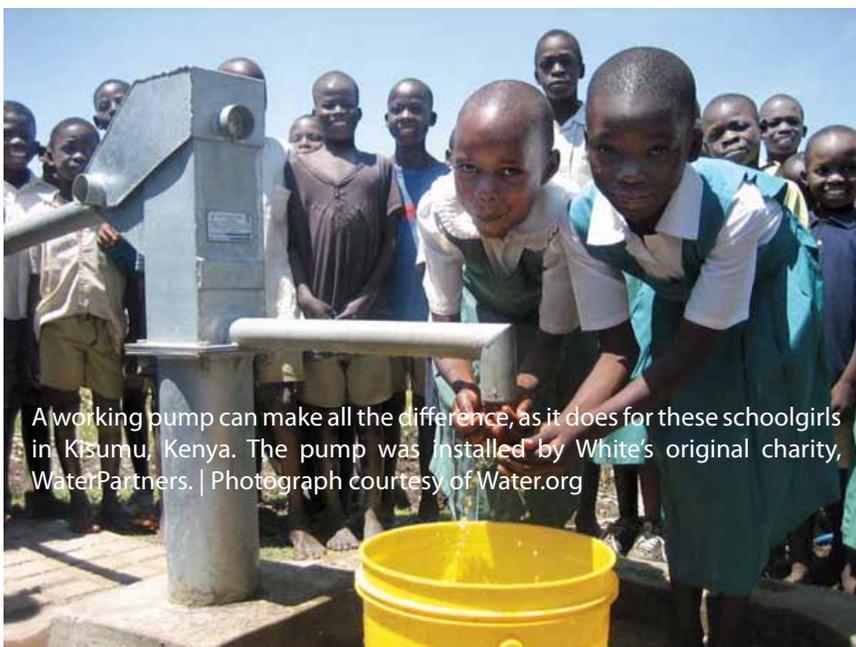
This led him to an important insight -- an “orthogonal insight,” his geeky term for the kind of thinking in which forces that appear unrelated or irrelevant help solve a problem in an unexpected way. (“You come to love Gary’s unique vernacular,” says Damon.) Poor people do have some money, White observed. And millions of them spend an inordinate amount of that buying water from the equivalent of loan sharks and hucksters -- opportunists with a faucet. “We knew they were getting water from somewhere because they were still alive,” he says. And for many of these poor communities, particularly those in quasi-urban settings, water infrastructure might be just a few kilometers away.

He put all of this together and came up with the basic thought behind WaterCredit: What if communities self-organized to get a loan to create their own wells or buy their way into water access? “We began to work with microfinance institutions [MFIs] instead of just NGOs,” White says. But infrastructure financing was a

sticking point. “Microfinancers had never lent to anything that didn’t have a built-in revenue source or collateral.” Convincing a local lender to take a risk means demonstrating demand, training communities to run a project, and making the case that the poor people can afford to repay the loan. “A tough sell,” says White, “but not impossible.”

WaterCredit is a full-on microfinance tool that tries to leave nothing to chance. Let’s say Water.org identifies an urban Indian community it might be able to help build a public toilet. They rally local people into a committee to run the project, and then persuade the local utility to risk a construction project in a neighborhood that seems too poor to pay its bills. An MFI works with a local lender to loan the committee the necessary money. After the toilet is built, educators must teach people how to pay their loan -- as well as why they should use their new toilets and, for that matter, wash their hands. All this for men and women who are in a hardened caste system. It is especially important for the women, because research shows that projects that ultimately succeed are designed with them in mind, as well as maintained mostly by them. So yes, it’s a long, tough sell. But if it works, a woman of low status might then be in charge of collecting maintenance fees -- just pennies -- at the new public toilet. That’s a woman who now has a job and dignity, and no dysentery.

In 2009, while filming *Invictus* in South Africa, Damon made a point of going with White to visit WaterCredit beneficiaries. “We’d go into a slum and talk to people who had taken out the loan, had a water tap or toilet in their house, and had already paid it back,” he says. “Their lives were changed.” Later, Damon got to know WaterCredit bankers and was just as impressed. An Indian branch manager explained that he was thrilled with his new customers, many of whom had returned for basic banking services. “He had been calling other branch managers, telling them how well



A working pump can make all the difference, as it does for these schoolgirls in Kisumu, Kenya. The pump was installed by White’s original charity, WaterPartners. | Photograph courtesy of Water.org

it worked,” says Damon. “WaterCredit is our proof that risky ideas do work sometimes. It is a big idea gone right, and it’s working all over the place. That’s when it gets really exciting.”

WaterCredit has elevated White to star status in the philanthropic world. In 2009, after a rigorous, multiyear vetting process, he won a Skoll Award for Social Entrepreneurship, scoring a \$765,000 grant and access to an unparalleled network of entrepreneurial thinkers. “[WaterCredit] is well beyond proof of concept now,” says Skoll’s Rothschild. “Financial institutions, and other people, are doing it now too. It’s a shift in the way that systems operate.”

SHORTLY AFTER HIS TRIP to Zambia, in a burst of his own orthogonal thinking, Damon, who has his own production company, greenlighted a documentary that dovetailed with his newly discovered water quest. Three ultramarathoners had decided -- for reasons that don’t seem much deeper than “It would be really cool to do this!” -- to run across the Sahara Desert from Senegal to Egypt. The runners, Charlie Engle, Ray Zahab, and Kevin Lin, suffered (both with, and because of, one another) through the equivalent of one-and-a-half marathons a day for 111 consecutive days amid the toughest conditions on earth. Before his Zambian conversion, Damon might have passed on producing the project. “This is basically a masochistic, somewhat selfish sport,” he says. “But these three crazy guys were going right through the belly of the beast in terms of poverty, in six vastly different countries. We could use the film to highlight the water issue.” Damon and his producers discovered several small, good NGOs focused on water along the way. “That’s how we found Gary.”

The film, *Running the Sahara*, released in 2007, is an example of the type of messaging that Damon can employ, one that deftly uses his skills as a Hollywood power player and storyteller. (When the Libyan government threatened to deny the runners entry, Damon and pal Robert De Niro, who were then shooting *The Good Shepherd* together, personally worked the phones.) “Awareness is as important to us as fundraising,” says Damon. “We want people to understand the issue in all its complexity.”

But getting attention isn’t as easy as you think, even for Damon. Consider this odd couple of YouTube videos: Matt Damon speaks to the Clinton Global Initiative about water -- 3,669 views; Matt Damon does a spot-on impression of Matthew McConaughey on Letterman -- 13,492,392 views. Damon has no interest in typical celebrity heart-tugging. “Basically, there is the Sally Struthers approach,” he says, “where you guilt the shit out of people and they end up turning the TV off.” And most star-studded mega-events, of which he’s headlined plenty, end up netting little to the organization. “That seems very analog to me,” he says. “Unless,” he adds, referring to a recent Robin Hood Foundation event, “you’re doing what these Goldman guys do and get Lady Gaga to raise \$47 million because they’re drunk and they’re trying to impress each other and they’re calling out numbers from the tables.” He pauses and laughs. “Of course, that is a kind of fundraiser we’d entertain for Water.org, but it’s the exception, not the rule.”

In today’s digital world, engagement can be stoked in ways that may not require Hollywood wattage. Sure, Damon can talk up his organization on Letterman; “that’s an audience of 2.4 million to hear our message,” says Water.org chief community officer Mike McCamon, who works closely with Damon on strategy, and is a veteran of Apple, Intel, and a handful of startups. But McCamon points out that 28 million people learned about the mission last December when they played Zynga’s FrontierVille and were offered a chance to buy or give a Water.org-branded blue water bison. That is the kind of engagement he could neither buy nor predict. “I cold-called Zynga out of the blue,” he says. “It was incredibly effective and took us about as far away from the pandering, puppy-dog-eyes style of messaging as you can get.” Zynga confirms raising \$300,000 for Water.org.

The organization is also developing its My.Water.Org, a mini site that lets people follow a community in Haiti that is in the process of developing a water project. This is method philanthropy the way it should be. Instead of showing pictures of Damon with desperate kids or wells with YOUR NAME HERE! plaques, visitors learn about the difficult struggle that comes with creating sustainable water projects, virtually shadowing a community’s efforts as it goes through months of town-hall meetings, trainings, negotiations, and public debates. Upon signing up, people become digital ambassadors of sorts, with progress reports, even the disappointing ones, posted through their Twitter or Facebook feeds. Around 13% of those who sign up donate, and “65% get another person to come to the site,” says McCamon. For a profession that deems a 2% clickthrough rate as success, that’s an avalanche of engagement.

Which raises an interesting question: How in the world is a mere global celebrity supposed to compete with that? How can Matt Damon contribute when a FrontierVille bison and online town halls

are hotter than an Oscar winner?

To the credit of both White and Damon, they rejoice that they even have such a question to consider. Damon does not seem to need the ego strokes of being associated with a good cause: He lives a quiet life for a celebrity of his stature. Damon, like White, is far more interested in pursuing the next big innovation, something that will likely build off of the contrarian genius of WaterCredit. The two have come to see that turning the poor into paying customers of a utility of their own creation spawns a consumer consciousness that can be harnessed. “There is development money allocated to communities all the time [via municipalities, NGOs, and international-aid agencies] that often never arrives,” says White. What mobile service could keep them in the loop, like a 311 for the poor? “If they knew what should be coming their way, they could hold others accountable,” he adds. In some communities, a water truck shows up daily. But since the women never know the time of the delivery, they can waste hours waiting with their water jugs for a truck that sometimes shows up empty. “What if there were a text system,” asks Damon, “that lets people know where the truck was and how full it was?” A compelling, time-saving notion, but hard to sell from the drawing board.

To explore possibilities such as these, the Water.org board approved, on that rainy day when I met with Damon, the creation of a new innovation fund. Damon kicked it off with a \$1 million donation, and the Hult International Business School followed with a \$1 million gift of its own. The fund’s goal is to spur development of a portfolio of new products and services that are specific to the bottom-of-the-pyramid water consumer. “It’s a very Silicon Valley approach,” says White. Invent. Test. Iterate. “And like the tech world, we can get the attention of bigger investors with concepts that have been proven in the field.” Damon hopes the fund will one day be open to individuals, not just institutional investors. “We all know what angel investing is now,” he says. “Why can’t we let people invest \$25 in, say, the Water.org lab? Let them be part of picking the next big idea.”

White and Damon agree on their movement’s future. The new big thing will probably be the result of orthogonal thinking. “We want to support people in demanding the services and aid they’ve got coming to them,” says White, “while having an easier life in the process.” What can make the lives of people at the bottom of the pyramid, the people who form their customer base, better? Mobile-phone apps? A new financing scheme? An unconventional alliance? A technology yet to be born? Whatever it is, the story to be told will require more than a plastic bottle of dirty water.