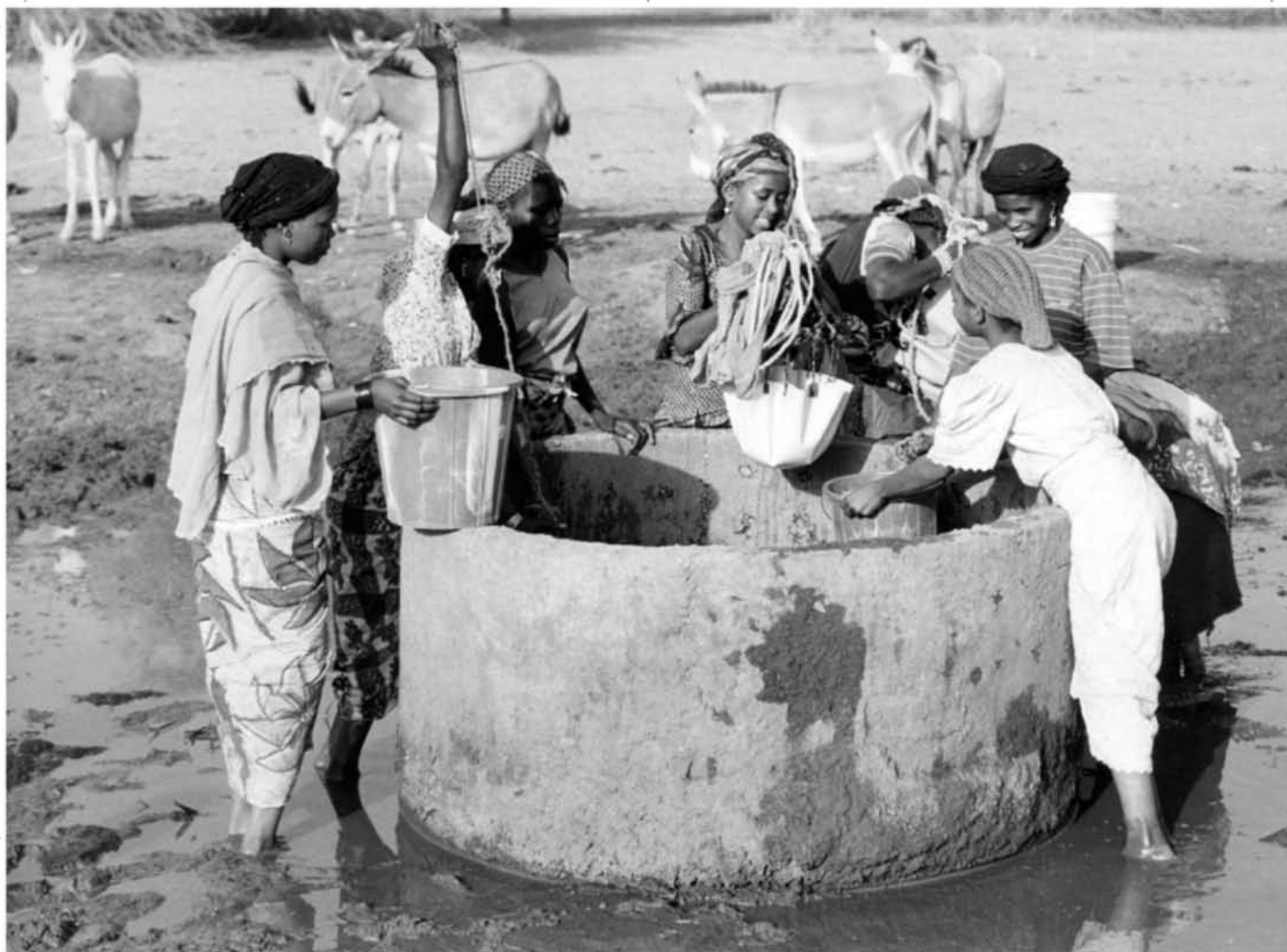




West Africa: Restoring the System of Life

A look into the catalyst of change

By Annie Suh

In sub-Saharan Africa where the infant mortality rate is 166 per 1,000, where 41.1 percent live on less than a dollar a day, and where only 42 percent have access to clean water (from a recent 2007 report of the UN Millennium Development Goals), change hardly seems possible. But the good news is that lives are being transformed—one village at a time. Organizations such as the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation realize that we cannot solely rely on our governments to be the impetus for change; it starts with a caring spirit.

Conrad Hilton, founder of Hilton Hotels, put his heart into action in 1944 when he established the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation. The foundation seeks to alleviate the sufferings of the world's most impoverished, work that reflects Hilton's last will and testament when he wrote:

"There is a natural law, a Divine law, that obliges you and me to relieve the suffering, the distressed and the destitute. Charity is a supreme virtue, and the great channel through which the mercy of God is passed on to mankind. It is the virtue that unites men and inspires their noblest efforts."

Following his death in 1979, Conrad Hilton solidified his legacy, ensuring philanthropy to his future generations and giving a bulk of his estate to the foundation. Since his passing, the foundation's giving has increased from \$5 million in 1983 to \$70 million in 2007.

His grandson, Steve Hilton, who now serves as the chairman and CEO, is determined to carry on this responsibility. "What we do touches lives, and that to me is an incredible blessing. Being a part of that, you get back and it makes my life more meaningful," expressed Hilton, who directs the foundation's grant-making activities and has primary oversight of programs for the blind, mentally ill homeless, international water development and early childhood development.



Opposite page: Young girls fetch contaminated water from a traditional well.

Above: A mother and child in Mali.

Left: A villager displays the filtering cloth she uses in trying to clean some of the contamination from the traditional well water. Photos: Gil Garcetti

In the midst of their goodwill activities around the world, the Hilton Foundation recognizes organizations that have greatly contributed to relieving human suffering. This year the \$1.5 million Conrad N. Hilton Humanitarian Prize, which is the world's largest, has been awarded to Tostan (see page 30). Tostan's human rights-based approach has led people to abandon harmful practices, including female genital cutting. The prize exists to raise the visibility of the organization that receives it, aiming to further encourage their cause.

Among the myriad programs the Hilton Foundation implements, providing access to safe water for rural communities in West Africa has been an ongoing commitment. As the chief architect of the West Africa Water Initiative (WAWI), the foundation has committed to a six- to seven-year effort targeting greater access to safe water in Ghana, Mali and Niger, partnering with World Vision and UNICEF, among others.

Like a natural ecosystem that functions properly, safe water has the effect of restoring the system of life. When safe water is available, entire village economies change and preventable diseases are halted.

Water is not available in West Africa the way it is in developed countries. Absent snow-capped mountains that allow rivers and lakes to flow abundantly, the only way to retrieve water is by digging. Lakes do exist, but with most of them evaporating within a matter of months, their supply cannot be utilized.

As a result, villagers rely on hand-dug wells—an invitation to infestation. Only about 40 feet deep, wells are open to mosquitoes and bugs that maneuver their way down. Subsequently, the water that villagers draw out is contaminated. Animal waste lying around the wells aggravates the situation, eventually setting off a chain of effects. For example, dirty water prevents children and adults from keeping their face clean, which can then cause a blinding disease called Trachoma. Trachoma occurs from a parasitic bacterium that grows within the cells of the eyelid.

Contaminated water also precipitates diarrhea, dysentery and guinea worm disease. Guinea worms can be ingested through water or they can develop from a break in the skin, causing a threadlike parasitic worm to grow up to three feet long and mature inside the human body. Without a cure, the only treatment is to remove the worm by winding it around a small stick over a long period of time. This usually incites intense pain and scarring.

In a new book entitled *Water is Key: A Better Future for Africa* that the Hilton Foundation underwrote in support of the water initiative, photographer and former LA County district attorney Gil Garcetti illustrates the vital linkage between safe water, health and the success of economic and public welfare efforts in West Africa through the medium of black and white photography. All proceeds will go to NGOs working on safe water projects.

Garcetti recounts his meeting with Amadou Toumani Touré, who is the president of Mali: "The Hilton Foundation representative and I alone met with the president of Mali ... and the quote that I remember the most was: 'If there was one thing I could do for my people, just one thing, I would give them safe, clean water because everything good flows from safe water, but I don't have the money.'"



Baron Hilton and Steve Hilton in front of Conrad Hilton's portrait. Photos: Hilton Foundation

More than the book being about poverty, despair and disease, it is meant to be primarily a book of hope and optimism. What local, safe water brings is manifold. It not only keeps villagers healthier, but agricultural methods are taught on how to re-use some of the sanitation water to make home gardens. Gardens then produce crops to sell in the markets and the extra money can be used to repair wells or build schools. Additionally, girls are able to attend school because of the time gained from not having to haul water from distant miles.

"There is a word in philanthropy called sustainability," Hilton said. "Essentially the idea is, if you try to help someone, can you do it in a way that keeps going and doesn't mess up the culture or environment?"

This sustainability measure is ideally met in West Africa's water needs where over 70 percent of the people don't have safe water, but there is plenty of safe water to be had. "They simply need the resource and the expertise to bring out that water," added Garcetti.

By funding a borehole well costing only \$10,000, lives can be directly altered. Through *Water is Key: A Better Future for Africa*, Garcetti is trying to build on what the Hilton Foundation is doing in joining efforts for the less fortunate. In the back of his book are lists of various NGOs committed to working on safe water for West Africa that readers can get help with. Peter Gleick, who is president of Pacific Institute, a water expert and editor of the book, has set up www.wateriskey.org, where anyone can contribute financially. At the end of the year, the donations will be distributed directly to NGOs working on safe-water projects in West Africa.

"This [book] is the vehicle by which we can sound the alarm and get people involved in the industrialized world. This is not just the United States' issue; this is the industrialized [world's] issue."

Living comfortably in Los Angeles, it may be easy for us to miss the realities transpiring in different parts of the world. But those who see the alarming disconnect, attempt to connect the two realities together. Be it village by village, or person by person, lives are being transformed—including some in West Africa.