The PlayPump: What Went Wrong?

Earlier this week, PBS’s Frontline [ran a story](http://www.pbs.org/frontlineworld/stories/southernafrica904/index.html)about the PlayPump, a technology that was supposed to bring drinking water to thousands of African communities by harnessing the power of children at play. The title of the Frontline story, “Troubled Water,” indicates that all didn’t go as planned with the PlayPump. As Frontline reports, dozens of PlayPumps in Mozambique sit idle, and in many villages, PlayPumps have been removed and hand pumps reinstalled.

The idea behind PlayPump is simple, and it’s not hard to see why so many people got excited about it. A merry-go-round type device is installed and connected to a water pump. As children play on the merry-go-round, water is pumped into a storage tank, and is then available on demand. In the end, the PlayPump project was a failure.

So, what went wrong? There are many ways to answer this question, some relating to the appropriate role of **foundations. Foundations are groups that donate money**. Should we require children to be the source of a pump’s power? Would children play on the merry-go-round enough? Would they get bored?

The [recommended minimum](http://www.lshtm.ac.uk/hpu/conflict/epidemiology/page_160.htm) daily water requirement is 15 litres per person which – based on the pump's capabilities – would require children to be "playing" non-stop for 27 hours in every day. Under more reasonable assumptions, a Playpump could theoretically provide the bare minimum water requirements for about 200 people a day based on two hours' constant "play" every day – considerably less than its claimed potential.

WaterAid, one of the world's biggest water charities agrees. It recently [issued a statement](http://www.wasrag.org/downloads/technology/Viability%20of%20PlayPumps.pdf) explaining why it does not support using Playpumps in its projects. It outlines concerns over the high costs ($14,000, excluding drilling), the fact that the pumps break and there is no one to fix them, the reliance on child labor and the risk of injury to children.

Another factor is that children may not be available at times of water demand, in the early morning, early evening and during wet weather. Or they may just get bored playing on the merry-go-round. It concludes that you could provide four conventional wells with hand pumps for the cost of just one Playpump, and that there are far cheaper and more sustainable ways of providing water without using Playpumps.

We’ll only be able to solve water challenges through innovation, and with that comes the risk of failure.  While in many ways PlayPump didn’t live up to its original promise, it would be a mistake to be overly critical of the project or its funders. They tried something new, innovative and bold, and learned from the experience. We can continue to learn from it, but let’s also focus on what we do next.

**SELECTIVE HIGHLIGHTING/UNDERLINING GIST STATEMENT**:

In a paragraph, explain in your own words why the PLAYPUMP project did not work. Be sure to use evidence from the passage in your GIST statement.