



Flowing from Water to Gender Equality

A Spotlight on Rebecca Peters, University of California, Berkeley

Innovators Connecting to Accelerate Global Development

The Story

In international development, one challenge often overlaps another. Rebecca Peters' mind was on the struggle of low-income communities to get access to clean water when the UC Berkeley undergraduate spent summer 2012 working for a nonprofit organization in Bolivia. "Water is life, and sanitation is dignity," Peters said. "We can map water access directly over socioeconomic status in the developing world."

But Peters knew that the issue of gender equality was just beneath the surface, as women bear most of the burden of fetching water. As Peters trained teachers and officials to operate water treatment systems installed at their schools by the Foundation for Sustainable Development and Water for People, she saw the impact water access had upon girls in particular, especially as it affected an issue many were embarrassed to talk about: menstruation. No water at a school means nowhere to wash up, so a girl is reluctant to go when she's having her period. Cultural attitudes may not discourage her from dropping out, and thus, water becomes an education issue.

Peters found little attention given to this intersection of issues among organizations in water and human rights, so she proposed her own project to address water sanitation and girls' health and education together.. She called it the Pachamama Project, after an indigenous name for Mother Earth.

This kind of thinking outside the box is encouraged by the "Big Ideas at Berkeley" competition for seed funding, managed by UC Berkeley's Development Impact Lab, part of USAID's Higher Education Solutions Network. Housed by the Blum Center for Developing Economies at UC Berkeley, the contest provides the next generation of problem-solvers with the funding and resources necessary to implement their ideas. Students submit a short proposal on what their project would do in its first year; applicants who are not selected for funding still receive feedback and can compete for a "people's choice" cash award.



Big Ideas winner Rebecca Peters has worked to improve water and sanitation in rural Mexico and Bolivia in cooperation with fellow UC Berkeley student Fermin Reygadas, center, pictured with Ian Balam and the award they received for their nonprofit Fundación Cántaro Azul.

Photo courtesy of Rebecca Peters.



Finalists are mentored as they expand their proposals. Judges choose winners in multiple categories. Finalists can also compete for an additional prize by delivering a sales pitch before a panel of judges comprised of USAID professionals and development practitioners.

As USAID created the Higher Education Solutions Network, the agency also expanded Big Ideas, funding three categories – Global Poverty Alleviation, Promoting Human Rights, and Open Data – that are open to students from all seven universities in the Network.

The Pachamama Project won in the Human Rights category and the sales pitch, and in summer 2013, Peters and project partner Lindsay Dreizler returned to Bolivia. In addition to installing water treatment systems in ten schools and two rural health clinics, they created a curriculum to encourage mothers, daughters, teachers, and community actors to talk about menstrual hygiene and the connection to water sanitation. To respect local cultures and customs, the educational materials were designed after interviews with teachers, residents, and development workers. The project team laid the groundwork to offer the curriculum in Mexico in cooperation with UC Berkeley Ph.D. student Fermin Reygadas, co-founder of Fundacion Cantaro Azul, a safe-water and hygiene NGO that Rebecca has worked with closely during her work.

Attempting to solve one challenge often reveals connections to another. Peters now wants to address other factors that keep girls out of school, such as early marriage.

“My professors and my advisors are always telling me, ‘You need to pick your niche! Are you going to be public health, or are you going to be policy, economics...?’ That’s a very old-school way of looking at it. We need to be ‘in water’ but looking at the other fields,” Peters said. “Being aware of political, economic, and social influences is the best way to be effective in the water field.”

Peters blogs about her research and travels at boliviawater.wordpress.com.



Image from the Pachamama Project campaign in rural Mexico and Bolivia to promote sanitation and hygiene education, by Big Ideas winners Rebecca Peters and Lindsay Dreizler.

For more information

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