



Background

In 2014, Samir Lakhani was in rural Cambodia working on a project to build sustainable fish ponds. Walking through a village one day, he saw a woman using laundry detergent—a toxic and dangerous substitute for soap—to bathe her infant child.

As disturbing as that was, Lakhani soon found that hygiene practices in the developing world were often far worse. **In some areas of the developing world, only 1% of households have soap for handwashing¹.** To make matters worse, even those who can find and afford soap often use improper hand washing technique. For far too many in the developing world, soap is a luxury.

It's in this context that **11 children under age five die every minute².** An overwhelming proportion of these deaths are caused by entirely preventable illnesses, including diarrheal diseases, acute respiratory infection, and other infections that cause fever. **Worldwide, 1.6 million deaths per year are attributed to unsafe water, poor sanitation, and lack of hygiene³.** While overcrowded hospitals have scrambled to focus on treatment—often turning away sick people who have traveled a great distance—there's been a critical, systemic lack of prevention.

Distressed, Samir returned to his Cambodian hotel room—and washed his hands. It dawned on him that that soap bar had been individually packaged, shipped in, and used once—and it was about to be thrown away.

One relative constant in Cambodia's tumultuous history has been its tourism industry. Thanks in large part to the ruins of the ancient Temples of Angkor, tourists have flocked to the country year after year—Cambodia's tourist count is rapidly approaching five million per year⁴. They choose from among thousands of hotels and guesthouses, where they partially use individually packaged soap bars. *Millions* of soap bars.

Eco-Soap Bank was born in a hotel bathroom in Siem Reap.

Its mission was threefold: improve hygiene, protect the environment, and positively impact local economies.

Handwashing with soap has been proven to reduce the presence of harmful bacteria by 92%⁵, but it's often overlooked as a public health intervention. Eco-Soap Bank would collect used soap bars from hotels and guesthouses, sanitize and remold them, and then distribute the clean soap bars to schools, health clinics, and village communities. Each distribution would be paired with hand washing training.

Eco-Soap Bank would also make use of other materials that hotels would normally discard, like shampoo bottles or other packaging materials. Instead of being shipped to landfills, these materials would find productive, humanitarian use.

The economic effects of poor hygiene are severe but diffuse. For example, systemic health problems can have drastic consequences on rates of school absenteeism. The poorest populations in developing countries have net primary school attendance rates as low as 4%⁶. Many women in developing nations also face myriad challenges. **Steady employment for women is one of the most serious economic issues in developing countries today⁷**. To mitigate this, all Eco-Soap Bank soapmakers would be women from disadvantaged backgrounds with no other reliable source of income. By employing them at a good wage and helping them to support their families, Eco-Soap Bank would also have a critical social impact.

Since its inception in 2014, Eco-Soap Bank has spawned **16 branches in 10 developing countries**. It's partnered with **960 hotels and 68 distribution partners**, employing **106 women**. It's recycled **over 108,000 pounds of soap**, resulting in **more than 1.3 million soap donations** to schools, health clinics, and village communities. So far, **over 730,000 people** have received soap and hand washing training from Eco-Soap Bank. Now, the organization is working to expand its reach to other developing countries with high mortality rates associated with hygiene-related illnesses.

By leveraging existing infrastructure and focusing on prevention, Eco-Soap Bank hopes to impart the tools and skills to keep people healthy for generations.

For more information, email contact@ecosoapbank.org or visit ecosoapbank.org.

¹ *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water: 2015 Update and MDG Assessment*. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2015. https://www.wssinfo.org/fileadmin/user_upload/resources/JMP-Update-report-2015_English.pdf. Accessed November 2, 2016.

² Under-Five Mortality: Current Status + Progress. unicef.org. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-survival/under-five-mortality/>. Updated October 2016. Accessed March 9 2017.

³ Hygiene Challenges and Resources in Lower Income Countries. cdc.gov. https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/hygiene/lidc/hygiene_challenges.html. Updated January 20, 2015. Accessed February 1, 2017.

⁴ *Tourism Statistics Report: Year 2016*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Cambodian Ministry of Tourism, Statistics and Tourism Information Department. http://www.tourismcambodia.org/images/mot/statistic_reports/tourism_statistics_year2016.pdf. Accessed February 2, 2017.

⁵ Burton M, Cobb E, Donachie P, et al. The Effect of Handwashing with Water or Soap on Bacterial Contamination of Hands. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. 2011 Jan; 8(1): 97-104. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3037063/>. Published online January 6, 2011. Accessed February 3, 2017.

⁶ Education: Current Status + Progress. unicef.org. <https://data.unicef.org/topic/education/overview/>. Updated April 2016. Accessed February 9, 2017.

⁷ Women's Economic Empowerment; The Key to a Sustainable World. globalwa.org. <http://globalwa.org/issues/2017-2/womens-economic-empowerment-key-sustainable-world/>. Updated 2017. Accessed March 9, 2017.