

Clean Water, Healthy Ways¹ *‘Air Bersih, Gaya Sehat’*

*"Water, water, everywhere, and all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere, nor any a drop to drink"*

The Rime of the Ancient Mariner
Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 1798

Dr. Kenneth F. Smith, PMP

Preamble: Reassigned to Indonesia in August 1978 by the US Agency for International Development (USAID) was a dramatic change from my previous Project Manager role in Korea institution-building to field-test various Rural Public Health objectives. Now I was Acting Director of USAID's Health, Population & Nutrition (HPN) Division, *until a public health professional or physician was reassigned.*² While finalizing USAID's role in a new 'Child Survival Project' jointly-funded by a consortium of international donors, I now had to supervise several professional health specialists managing³ USAID/Indonesia's on-going Public Health Portfolio;⁴ as well as review, refine, prune &/or improve the existing portfolio -- where feasible.

¹ How to cite this article: Smith, K. F. (2026). Clean Water, Healthy Ways. *PM World Journal*, Vol. XV, Issue IX – September. [Not real names; *merely descriptive of the Program concepts* with my limited knowledge & understanding of the Indonesian language. NOTE: Water is "Air" but pronounced 'Eye-Ear.']

² The previous HPN Director was emergency-med-evac'd while I was temporarily in Jakarta assisting planning the joint Child Survival Project. So, subsequently, I was fortuitously reassigned from Korea.

³ NOTE: Although USAID personnel were designated 'Managers' and/or Advisors for the Programs and Projects we sponsored, actual day-to-day responsibility for implementation rested with the host-country Ministry departmental staff, USAID contractors &/or NGO-designated personnel. Our role was advice, coordination, monitoring, facilitation, and evaluation, as well as USAID's "Contract Office Technical Representatives" (COTARS). Other USAID personnel were responsible for financing & auditing.

⁴ Which was essentially USAID's 'old school' Santa Claus-style *ad hoc* myriad micro-technical financial assistance support endeavors; that Mission Director Tom Niblock wanted turned around. [NOTE: After its inception in 1961 to assist governments of developing countries by providing large-scale infrastructure projects, and macro-economic growth programs in diverse aspects of agriculture, education, public health, as well as emergency disaster relief; USAID faced continual congressional criticism because it was unable to justify its 'Foreign Aid' portfolio accomplishments in terms of benefit/cost, cost/effectiveness, or return on investment. In 1971, AID/Washington mandated improved systematic projectized planning -- *facilitated with a new 'Log-frame' methodology* -- to address congressional concerns. However, in 1973, a "New Directions" policy in Foreign Assistance refocused USAID to *prioritize basic humanitarian needs* in rural communities, over infrastructure. Numerous diverse activities emerged with that shift, but exacerbated project targeting, monitoring, accomplishment & accountability; as well as even more difficult to satisfy Congress. Furthermore -- *given multi-year on-going activities; inability & unwillingness to terminate them without obvious inappropriateness, ineffectiveness or malfeasance; and lengthy gestation periods to develop & launch new projects* -- turning USAID's 'ship of state' around was a very cumbersome and slow process.]

Likewise, I soon discovered USAID's 'Programs' & 'Projects' were merely a loose Portfolio of about 30 desirable but disparate 'initiatives' supporting Indonesia's Public Health Ministry.

Phil Smart was a key technical Advisor on my Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH) staff. An experienced public health & sanitary engineer, Phil had been in Indonesia for a considerable time, juggling several activities in food inspection, potable water, waste disposal & sanitation. Phil also had traveled widely and spoke Indonesian fluently, so he always accompanied me as my technical expert, interpreter/translator⁵ and tour guide on '*ground truthing*' trips to familiarize me with my newly acquired portfolio.

I also had two consultants under contract from Georgia Tech⁶ directly assisting a number of dispersed Indonesian small business enterprises to manufacture a deep-well water-lift pump⁷ -- developed by the Battelle Memorial Institute (BMI). The Health Ministry then purchased the pumps for installation in nearby community 'Kampungs.' In addition to this private enterprise water-pump manufacture & government procurement coordination, USAID supported another 'initiative' to promote & install sanitary sealed-toilets in community Kampungs. Subsequently the Ministry of Health merged these three diffused projects – *Government-sponsored Small-business Pump manufacture; Government potable water well-drilling, capped with the BMI pumps; and Government Kampung Toilet construction* -- into one 'Program' for management.

Intrigued to see what I had 'inherited -- as well as possibly restructure from USAID's standpoint -- I accompanied Phil and Kermit on a field trip to Banjarmasin, the capital of South Kalimantan province, Borneo,⁸ to see this new 3-in-1 program in action, and get some feedback from the target beneficiaries as well as the program field implementers.

Arriving at the site, we were met by the local Indonesian Ministry program officer and the Kampung chief who proudly showed us their pride & joy. The well had been drilled; the Battelle pump installed; and everything was working fine. The villagers were very happy with the outcome.

⁵ Strictly speaking: **Interpreter** for speech, and **Translator** for the written word; but in practice often used interchangeably.

⁶ Kermit Moh was the 'COP' – i.e. Chief of Party. [I still remember his name because it reminded me of a Sesame Street character my younger kids used to watch on TV.]

⁷ The principal features of the Battelle pump were that it had a capability to lift water up to 100 meters vs. 10 meters of traditional pumps. Furthermore, the pump was made of stainless steel, had fewer moving parts, was easier to handle – even by women and small children (*who in most developing country environments were the ones tasked with the water "fetch and carry" duty*) -- and was less susceptible to breakage, or malfunction than traditional cast iron "Dragon pumps".

⁸ Situated on a labyrinth of canals, its nickname is "*the city of a thousand rivers*." [I was intrigued by the numerous decrepit shells of old American cars lining the banks of the canals and roadways.]

However, the all-enclosed sealed-toilet had been erected adjacent to the well -- *like a small outhouse -- on the same concrete base!* Moreover, the officials reported they had been able to save enough cement from the project to build another little patio nearby for community use.

Aghast at this misapplication of resources & effort⁹ which – *at first blush* -- must have been brought about by a total misunderstanding of primary public health concepts, my enlightenment from the on-site interview with the local Ministry program officer' (and his translated side-discussions with the target beneficiary village chief) – *as best I can recall* -- evolved like this:

Me: *"I'm not a public health specialist, but I'm sure the toilet should not be sitting so close to the well. Shouldn't it be several meters down-stream from the well, in order not to pollute the ground water?"*

To which the program officer replied *"No problem, Tuan; they don't use the toilet!"*

"If they don't use the toilet, where do they go?" I asked.

"In the river, or the fields -- where they always go! We tried to get them to use a stand-alone toilet before, but it was too dirty and smelly! So we decided to combine the well & toilet and save building materials." **was the astounding response!**

"If the villagers don't use the toilets, then why were/are toilets being built at all?" I questioned.

To which came the mindless 'bureaucratic-obedience' response over common-sense:¹⁰

"Because the Ministry in Jakarta contracted us to. We have 'x' number to construct in the province by the end of the year!"

So, then I asked *"What would you do if you didn't have to build toilets?"*

"We'd drill more holes to build more wells, and install more pumps" was his answer.

⁹ Inside the shed structure, a sealed-toilet has a borehole. After defecating, the user manually pours water from a container to flush their waste into an S-curve piping arrangement to two – or more -- adjacent pits (which eventually can be dug out as compost). However, in the meantime, an unhygienic variation of 'toilet-water' *immediately begins seeping into the surrounding soil!*

¹⁰ **Note:** While Americans are not immune to this syndrome, I have frequently observed the unquestioning obedience behavior trait by bureaucrats in other cultures. Indeed, there can be *significant differences* between the homogenous populations of different countries with respect to the Power Distance between bosses, intermediate supervisors and their employees – *i.e. their Levels of Respect for, attitudes towards, and the extent of obedience to Vested Authority; as well as three other dimensional variables:* 1. Individualism vs Collectivism, 2. Masculine vs Feminine Objectives, and 3. Uncertainty (Risk) Avoidance – *i.e. desire for structure.* **For more detail see:** Geert Hofstede "Cultural Dimensions" & Table 3.3 'Country Scores on Cultural Values.'

In Conclusion:

While the intent and objectives of the tripartite program were worthy, this feedback was very disconcerting, **reflecting the unintended consequences of *doing development* -- i.e. supporting objectives both USAID & the Ministry agreed *at the strategic level* the country needed and they could have; *rather than providing what the target beneficiaries actually wanted.***

My first order of business after returning to Jakarta was to confer with the Ministry to inform them of the situation; and request a cease & desist order on toilet construction in that area -- *unless and/or until they were going to be utilized; then appropriately located.*¹¹ Then, for them to send a nationwide technical reminder alert on the infeasibility of closely co-locating wells with toilets.

Next, I held a follow-up meeting to discuss how the Ministry could restructure the activities into an integrated program, utilizing the following USAID guidelines for future activities:

1. Check with the community to determine what ***they wanted***, rather than what you think they need.
2. Make frequent follow-up ‘ground truthing’ field trips -- to observe and obtain feedback from target beneficiaries – to verify that everything is going according to expectations.
3. Empower and encourage field officers to proffer constructive feedback – *without being admonished* -- when things can’t or won’t work out as expected.
4. Verify that Performance against Targets reflects *meaningful* accomplishment!
5. Be flexible: Consult with USAID to modify targets whenever it seems appropriate.

Finally, for this program, I also arranged for some Ministry program officials to visit nearby Malaysia and confer with some of their Public Health personnel, observe & learn how they had successfully induced rural residents in similar circumstances to desist from random river & bush urination & defecation practices; and adapt to utilizing sanitary community toilet facilities.¹²

Lessons Re-Learned:

1. **Check with stakeholders – *particularly target beneficiaries* – before finalizing programs & projects.**
2. **Technical follow-up monitoring is essential *for understanding, compliance and obtaining feedback for rectification where appropriate.***

¹¹ Do not generalize based on a single area situation.

¹² NOTE: The Malaysian toilets were enclosed in a fly/mosquito-screened shed; and inside had a ‘VIP’ Ventilated Improved Pit system with a bore-hole cover, as well as a vent-pipe to dissipate unpleasant odors.

About the Author



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Initially a US Civil Service Management Intern, then a management analyst & systems specialist with the US Defense Department, Ken subsequently had a career as a senior foreign service officer -- management & evaluation specialist, project manager, and in-house facilitator/trainer -- with the US State Department's Agency for International Development (USAID). Ken assisted host country governments in many countries to plan, monitor and evaluate projects in various technical sectors; working 'hands-on' with their officers as well as other USAID personnel, contractors and NGOs. Intermittently, he was also a team leader &/or team member to conduct project, program & ~~and~~ country-level portfolio analyses and evaluations.

Concurrently, Ken had an active dual career as an Air Force ready-reservist in Asia (Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Philippines) as well as the Washington D.C. area (DC, VA & MD); and had additional duties as an Air Force Academy Liaison Officer (ALO) and also Chairman of a Congressional Military Services Academy Advisory Board (SAAB). He retired as a 'bird' colonel, but voluntarily continued SAAB & ALO duties for another 18 years.

After retirement from USAID, Ken was a project management consultant for the World Bank, ADB, UNDP & USAID for another 40 years. Now, in 'semi-retirement', Ken continues to conduct intermittent workshops for the international Project Management Institute (PMI) Philippines Chapter, as well as write articles for the Project Management World Journal (PMWJ).

***"Age is an issue of mind over matter.
If you don't mind, it doesn't matter."***

Mark Twain

He earned his DPA (Doctor of Public Administration) from the George Mason University (GMU) in Virginia, his MS from Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT Systems Analysis Fellow, Center for Advanced Engineering Study), and BA & MA degrees in Government & International Relations from the University of Connecticut (UConn). A long-time member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) and IPMA-USA, Ken is a Certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and a member of both the PMI® Hawaii & Philippines Chapters.

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Ken has two KENBOOKS:

1. Project Management PRAXIS which includes many innovative project management tools & techniques; and describes a “Toolkit” of related templates, and
2. MUSINGS on Project Management -- a compilation of contemporary concerns in project planning, monitoring & evaluation, with some tools & techniques suggested for their solution.

Both books are available from Amazon, and their related templates are available directly from him at kenfsmith@aol.com on proof of purchase.