

# The Worth of Water

An Interview with Gary White, Chief Executive Officer and Co-Founder, Water.org and WaterEquity



Gary White and Matt Damon play with schoolchildren in Tiruchirappalli, Tamil Nadu, India

**EDITORS' NOTE** Gary White is the CEO and Co-Founder of Water.org and WaterEquity, nonprofit organizations dedicated to empowering people in the developing world to gain access to safe water and sanitation. Water.org is the resulting organization of the July 2009 merger between WaterPartners, co-founded by White in 1990, and H2O Africa, co-founded by actor Matt Damon. White developed Water.org's WaterCredit Initiative, creating new financing options for poor

populations to meet their water supply and sanitation needs. He also developed and now leads WaterEquity, the first-ever impact investment manager dedicated to ending the global water crisis in our lifetime, with an exclusive focus on raising and deploying capital to water and sanitation businesses throughout Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Over the past 25 years, White's entrepreneurial vision has driven innovations in the way water and sanitation projects are delivered

and financed, innovations that now serve as a model in the sector. He is a leading advisor in the water and sanitation space, counseling organizations such as the Skoll Foundation, Bank of America Foundation, PepsiCo Foundation, IKEA Foundation and the Caterpillar Foundation on responses to the global water crisis. White is a founding board member of the Millennium Water Alliance and Water Advocates. He was selected as a Skoll Foundation Social Entrepreneur in 2009 and a Schwab Foundation Social Entrepreneur in 2012. In 2011, he was named to the TIME 100 list of the world's most influential people. In 2014, he was named to the World Economic Forum's Global Agenda Council on Water. In 2017, White was awarded the Forbes 400 Lifetime Achievement Award for Social Entrepreneurship. White's educational credentials include three degrees in Civil and Environmental Engineering from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Missouri University of Science and Technology.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEFS** Water.org ([water.org](http://water.org)) is an international nonprofit organization that has positively transformed more than 43 million lives around the world with access to safe water or sanitation. Founded by Gary White and Matt Damon, Water.org pioneers market-driven financial solutions to the global water crisis. For 30 years, it has been providing women hope, children health, and families a future.

WaterEquity ([waterequity.org](http://waterequity.org)) is a first of its kind asset manager that invests in financial institutions and enterprises in emerging markets delivering access to safe water and sanitation to low-income families, while offering an attractive risk-return profile to investors.

***“Access to water is access to education, access to work, access above all to the kind of future we want for our own families and all the members of our human family.”***

**Matt Damon, Water.org Co-Founder**

**“Water.org is a global nonprofit organization that helps people get access to safe water and sanitation through affordable financing, such as small loans. To date, we’ve reached more than 43 million people with access to safe water and sanitation.”**

**Will you discuss the history and mission of Water.org and highlight its work and initiatives?**

In November 1990, I brought together my friends and family – about 100 people. We had dinner in the basement of the parish where I grew up and I shared my experiences working on water projects in Latin America. We raised about \$4,300 that night – enough money to get a village water.

A year later, we launched WaterPartners International. Through WaterPartners, I pursued a vision of bringing safe water to communities in need and we did, one well at a time. However, it was not fast enough. The urgency of the water crisis called for more. I traveled and studied the global needs and economies of families living in poverty until one day I arrived at a solution that, to date, has changed the lives of more than 43 million people.

The idea started when I was in India. I met a woman who was paying a loan shark 125 percent interest to buy a toilet. She was living on \$2 a day and absorbing a crushing debt. As I traveled it became clear this was shockingly common – there are millions of families spending a large portion of their income on temporary water and sanitation access. The expense traps them in a cycle of poverty.

That’s when it hit me. What if we loaned these women the money to install their own water tap or their own toilet at an affordable rate? They could then use the money they were paying each week to a water vendor to re-pay their loan instead. When repaid, they would own their toilet and have long-term access to water. I shared my idea with financial institutions and for the first time, microfinance institutions

started lending for water connections and toilets, establishing WaterCredit as a viable solution for millions in need of safe water and sanitation.

Right around this time, I attended the annual Clinton Global Initiative in New York. That is when I met actor Matt Damon who, as a result of his passion to help communities in Africa get safe water, had founded his own water charity. We quickly determined we could have significantly more impact around the world if we worked together. In 2009, we merged our organizations – WaterPartners International and H2O Africa – to become Water.org.

Water.org is a global nonprofit organization that helps people get access to safe water and sanitation through affordable financing, such as small loans. To date, we’ve reached more than 43 million people with access to safe water and sanitation. We have leveraged over 3.5 billion in capital to support small loans that bring access to safe water and sanitation to people in need.

**You have said that, “Any society with the guarantee of safe water has a chance to realize its full potential.” Will you discuss the critical role that safe water plays in providing opportunity and hope in the world?**

Today, 771 million people – 1 in 10 – lack access to safe water and 1.7 billion people – 1 in 4 – lack access to a toilet. Women are disproportionately affected by the water crisis, as they are often responsible for collecting water for their families. Women and girls spend 200 million hours every day collecting water and 266 million hours every day finding a place to go. This takes time away from work, school and caring for family. When women have access to safe water at home, they have time to work and add to their household income.

The water crisis is a health crisis. Nearly 1 million people die each year from water, sanitation and hygiene-related diseases, and every 2 minutes a child dies from a water-related disease. Access to safe water and sanitation contributes to improved health and helps prevent the spread of infectious disease. It means reduced child and maternal mortality rates. It means reduced physical injury from constant lifting and carrying heavy loads of water.

Children are often responsible for collecting water for their families. This takes time away from school and play. Access to safe water and sanitation changes this. Reductions in time spent collecting water have been found to increase school attendance, especially for girls. Access to safe water gives children time to play and opportunity for a bright future.

Time spent gathering water or seeking safe sanitation accounts for billions in lost economic opportunities. \$260 billion is lost globally each year due to lack of basic water and sanitation. Access to safe water and sanitation at home turns time spent into time saved, giving families more time to pursue education and work opportunities that will help them break the cycle of poverty.

**What needs to be done to drive lasting, sustainable change in achieving full water security for people all over the world?**

One of the major barriers to safe water and sanitation is access to affordable financing. People living in poverty pay 12-15 times more than their wealthier neighbors for access to safe water and sanitation, often spending more than 20 percent of their income on water from other sources.

**“The water crisis is a health crisis. Nearly 1 million people die each year from water, sanitation and hygiene-related diseases, and every 2 minutes a child dies from a water-related disease.”**

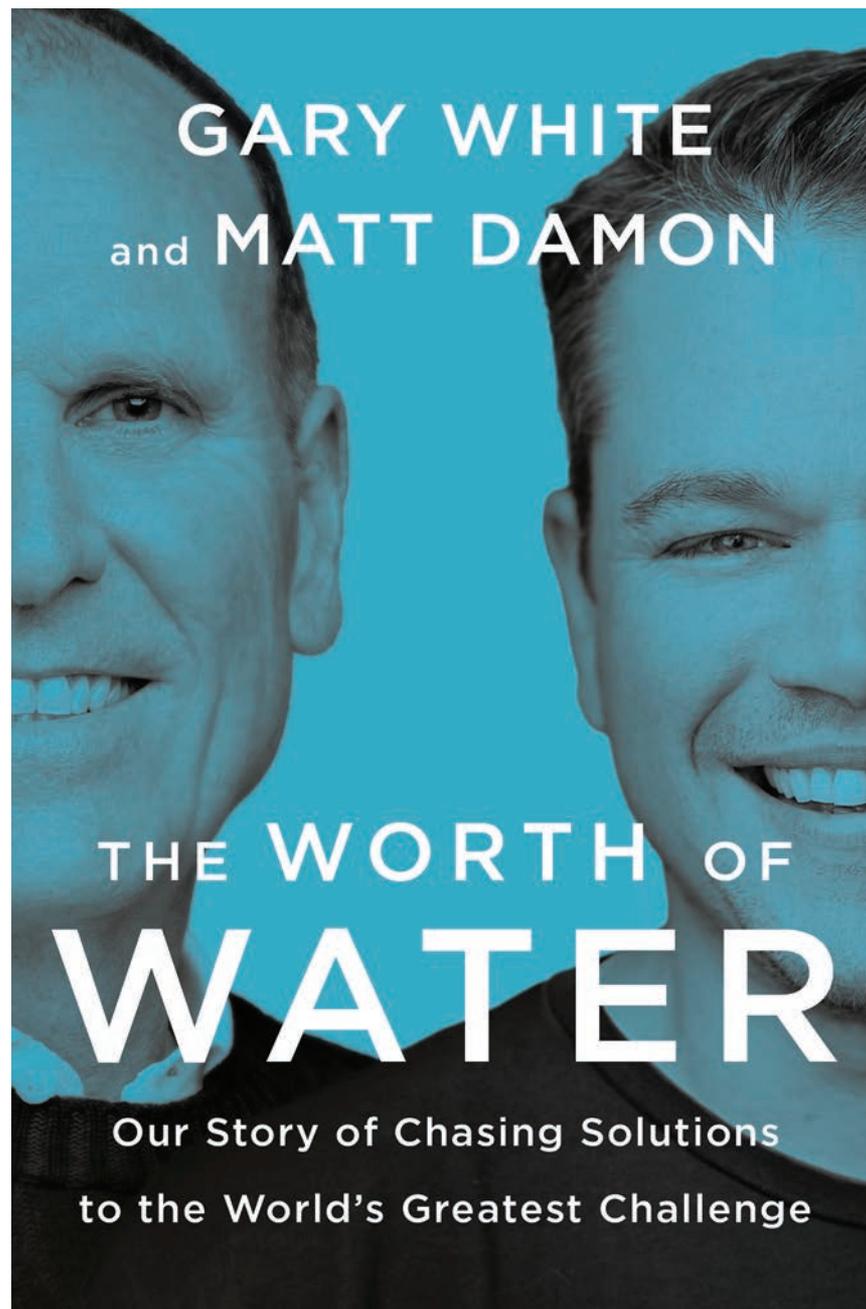
Our big challenge is how to get sustainable solutions to 20 percent of the global population, most of whom are living on less than \$6 per day. What most people lack is access to capital – they simply can't save enough to install a tap or a toilet in their house. Millions of people around the world could get access to safe water in their homes with the help of small, affordable loans. We calculate more than 800 million people want access to micro-loans to pay for improved water and sanitation solutions that will increase their resilience to climate change, overall well-being, and ability to work. If we can mobilize the capital into the sector, we can solve the global water and sanitation crisis.

Here is an example of what happens when someone solves their water and sanitation needs:

Alice lives in Kenya, on a rural farm. Alice and her family have a dairy cow, a few goats, and dozens of chickens. Beyond the livestock, Alice has pots of herbs and vegetables and a few fruit trees. The livestock, the plants, the trees – Alice and her family rely on the food they produce. In the same way, these things rely on Alice to give them water. So how does one living in rural Kenya get enough water to not only provide for their family's needs, but to also keep their plants and animals healthy? For a time, Alice had to piece together water from various sources.

Alice gathered water in buckets and jugs during the rainy season. She walked a few kilometers daily to draw water from a nearby pond for laundry and cooking. During the dry seasons, Alice paid a local man to haul water from the pond with his truck. This cost about \$60 per month.

For decades Alice paid in time and money to secure her water. When Water.org's partner in Kenya, Equity Bank, introduced the idea of financing water and sanitation solutions for families in Alice's village, Alice and her husband wanted to learn more. Following a meeting with the WASH program manager, the couple determined a small loan for a large water harvesting tank was what they needed. For 2,000 Kenyan shillings each month – the equivalent of about \$20 – Alice now has an 8,000-liter water harvesting tank connected to her home. The rain harvesting tank holds enough water to feed the animals, water the fruits and vegetables, and to cover the families washing, cooking and bathing needs. Not only does this save dozens of hours each week that were once spent on water collection, but she and her husband save about \$40 per month.



**Do you feel that world leaders, local governments and the business community have been effectively engaged in this effort and understand the severity of the safe water crisis?**

Yes, in fact, the Water Resilience Coalition, founded in 2020, is an industry-driven, CEO-led coalition of the UN Global Compact CEO Water Mandate that aims to elevate the global water crisis to the top of the corporate agenda and preserve the world's freshwater resources through collective action in water-stressed basins and ambitious, quantifiable commitments. To date, over 20 companies have joined the Coalition to advance water stewardship. Together, the members of the Water Resilience Coalition commit to taking the path toward a water resilient future in meaningful and measurable ways.

They confirm that their companies will achieve the following by 2050, through both individual and collective actions:

- Net positive water impact: Achieve a measurable and net positive impact in

water-stressed basins on availability, quality and accessibility through industry-leading water operations and basin initiatives.

- Water-resilient value chain: Develop, implement, and enable strategies to support leading impact-based water resilience practices across the global value chain.

- Global leadership: Raise the global ambition of water resilience through public and corporate outreach.

**How did Water.org adapt the way it works to address the challenges caused by the global pandemic?**

For Water.org, which works in 13 countries to help people finance and achieve their own water solutions, the operational problems were immediate. Each of those countries instituted its own lockdown, travel restrictions, and bans on gatherings. Water.org teams everywhere had to shift to remote work, shift assignments, and suspend office visits and field data collection. We rushed to develop and share videos and other resources on COVID-19 prevention. We attended and hosted international webinars to retain a global perspective among myriad local concerns. We also experienced a significant impact on fundraising that compelled us to make hard choices about costs.

Here is an in-depth article about the ways we flexed: <https://skoll.org/2020/08/25/what-to-do-during-a-pandemic-in-a-world-of-water-inequality/>

**How critical are metrics to measure the impact of Water.org's efforts and programs?**

Essential. We have a robust Insights and Innovation team that manages our in-country monitoring and evaluation teams. With accurate and timely data, we can move and flex resources to meet changes on the ground, we can swiftly identify barriers and surmount them, and we can support our partners' internal reporting needs.

**Will you discuss Matt Damon's passion and commitment for the work of Water.org and how deeply engaged he is in its efforts?**

Matt and I have co-authored a book, *The Worth of Water*, due to be published on March 29 by Portfolio, Penguin Random House. Matt speaks for himself in the book and I think that is the best way for readers to hear from him. In fact, we both voice the audio version, each speaking to his own chapters.

Here is a perspective piece about the book: <https://water.org/about-us/news-press/the-worth-of-water/> ●