

MEET JOHN NYAGWENCHA

AQUA CLARA KENYA



John Nyagwencha, CEO of Aqua Clara Kenya

John, you've been with Aqua Clara Kenya (ACK) almost since its start in 2009. Was there a particular experience that inspired you to join?

I grew up with my family in a village in Western Kenya and my mother was always concerned about contaminated water. She boiled it religiously. When I moved out during my master's degree and lived on the outskirts of Nairobi, I was much more careless. As a result, I came down with typhoid, which turned out to be quite serious. Then I moved back with my family to recover and noticed that my mother had stopped boiling water. I was concerned that she put all her faith into this dubious-looking object in the back of her house: a filter from Aqua Clara International, a US-based charity. Since I had studied biology and chemistry, I was highly sceptical. But I reached out to Aqua Clara and they were happy to meet, answer my questions, and let me test the filters. This is how it all started.

So initially, you joined ACK to prove that the solution does NOT work?

Absolutely. As a scientist, I was obsessed with evidence, but I was quickly convinced that the filters were indeed safe. More importantly, I had a fast introduction to a fulfilling space where I felt that my educational background could be truly meaningful.

Do you remember a customer experience that fed your feeling of fulfillment?

I still remember an old man who called us to complain. After drinking the ACK-filtered water for a month, it was the first time in his life that he didn't have stomach aches. He thought that something must be wrong with our product. It was wonderful to hear such stories and witness the positive impact on the lives of our customers. After this initial experience as a student worker testing the filters, Aqua Clara asked me to join full-time as a manager and I was keen to continue this mission and give people hope.

Not feeling sick is just the start. Which other effects do your customers experience when having access to safe water?

If you boil water, you spend around 2 to 3 hours per day on that task. With filters, our customers suddenly have more time for their children, their farms, or other productive work. [There is this direct correlation between filters and more available time, more income, and generally an improvement in the customers' quality of life.](#)

You have worked for many years in the WASH space. Are there any major challenges that you observe right now?

There are two, from my perspective. The first challenge is people's awareness of water quality. Water sources that may have been pristine in the past, are not necessarily safe anymore today. For example, in Western Kenya, people have a history of drinking water from streams. Due to an increasing population density, however, these streams become polluted, although they're still considered safe in people's minds. This is why we need to constantly invest in awareness-building. Also, more and more people will need filters in the future.

Will these people be able to afford the filters?

Affordability is indeed the second challenge in WASH. Most of our customers are living on 5 USD per day or less. Therefore, disposable income is a major factor, especially if the economy isn't doing well. For example, right after COVID, many customers lost their income. Filters suddenly became too expensive or were low priority, because what counted most was having enough food on the table.

ACK has a history of serving the most vulnerable and hardest-to-reach communities. Now, you're in the middle of a transition from an NGO-type organization to a structural hybrid. Do you notice changes and tensions with your stakeholders?

In the past, it was very challenging for us to mix subsidized with commercial activities. We had two very distinct audiences and motivations: Donors, who focus on impact, were often concerned that we may use their grants to make money. Investors, on the other hand, were sceptical about our ability to be commercially attractive. To overcome this tension and allow us to scale, we decided to split our activities into two separate entities. The non-profit entity is especially important for awareness-building. The for-profit arm focuses on selling our products. Both are intertwined and critical for each other: [You can't sell if you haven't created awareness first, and you can't create awareness if you can't sell a product sustainably.](#)



This synergy is vital. We've been successful with this approach, but of course, there are still tensions.

How can ILF for WASH help you with these tensions? What drove you to apply?

The program was a lucky incident and couldn't have come at a better time. There was a big risk for our commercial arm to become "too commercial", also due to pressure from investors for financial returns. Typically, as an entrepreneur, you get tempted to compromise in such a situation and maybe sell to families with higher incomes. But once you deviate from your mission, it's very hard to come back. The ILF for WASH program empowered us NOT to go down that path. It provided us with incentives to stay on mission and continue to focus on the hardest-to-reach communities. [For me, Impact-Linked Finance is a great reminder of what your mission really is. It lays the foundation to stay true to your impact goals and provides you with incentives to pursue them.](#)

Defining the impact metrics for these incentives together with the ILF for WASH managers was quite interactive. Did you expect this level of co-creation?

I certainly expected that it would take as long as it did. And I also expected it to be as innovative as it was. At the end, I felt like *"Wow, look at how much we've been able to learn and how innovative the tools are that we're using!"*. For example, Roots of Impact came up with this Relative Wealth Index tool that allows us to pinpoint customers who don't have an official street address. *In addition, we started to look at our data in a way that we had never done before. I also liked the adaptiveness of the approach and the appreciation of our processes and where we want to go.* Me and my team are happy to have been part of this process. We even think that it would be amazing to publish some of these insights and tools for the benefit of other entrepreneurs.



You started measuring the three impact metrics a while ago. How satisfied are you with the results to date?

The second metric, which incentivizes us to place our new hubs in areas with an increased probability of impact, has worked really well. The first metric has been a bit more challenging. We are looking at the proportion of our low-income customers, and for this, we had to be very innovative. For example, we used the Relative Wealth Index tool mentioned above to estimate the income levels of the customers we are reaching. With the third metric, we encourage our customers to regularly

wash the filters, and this is coming along nicely. We already had a very good after-sales service before. But now we're building an additional educational element into our process: As soon as a product is sold to the customer, the sales agent trains the customer on how to maintain the water filter, so the quality stays high. Within a month, we also have a follow-up.

After you have worked with Impact-Linked Finance for a bit, how would you describe it in one sentence?

Impact-Linked Finance helps us go where we really want to go but sometimes don't manage to go.

What is your biggest dream for ACK for the foreseeable future?

When we did our study with 60_decibels, we found out that 91% of our target customers have no awareness of our products or those of our competitors. *I dream that 5 years from now, ACK will be a household name, and poor communities will know about our safe water solutions and be able to buy them.*

Interview by Christina Moehrle, Roots of Impact / Pictures by ACK