

CASE STUDY SERIES

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Selling Health: Hindustan Lever Limited and the Soap Market

In the category of infectious diseases, only acute respiratory infections and AIDS kill more people per year than diarrhea, which accounts for 2.2 million deaths annually.¹

India contributes to 30 percent of all diarrhea deaths in the world.²

These statistics outline the pervasiveness of diarrheal disease in the developing world and the tremendous toll it takes on the public health, especially among the poor and children. In India alone, 19.2 percent of the children suffer from diarrhea.³ At the same time, the preventive measures and cures are relatively simple: access to safe water and sanitation facilities and instruction on better hygiene practices. Yet, in spite of the efforts of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), developmental agencies, and governments, the problem persists. So what is a viable solution?

THE INNOVATION

The paradox of diarrheal disease is that the solution is known and inexpensive, but it is difficult to reach and educate the poor about the need to wash hands with soap. Hindustan Lever Ltd. (HLL), the largest soap producer in India, helped create a unique approach to public-private partnership as a solution, and made this public health issue an integral part of its business.

This case traces the efforts of HLL, the Indian subsidiary of Unilever, in combating the health issue of diarrheal disease through innovative methods of marketing a common consumer good—soap.

This report was written by Mindy Murch and Kate Reeder, under the supervision of Professor C.K. Prahalad. The report is intended to be a catalyst for discussion and is not intended to illustrate effective or ineffective strategies.

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