

Potters for Peace

Using Best Practices

and

Scaling Up at the Gateway





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- The US based nonprofit Potters for Peace (PFP) and its Canadian sister organization Potters Without Borders are arguably the foremost promoters and its consultants the most experienced hands-on technical workers for the ceramic pot water filter. We have worked to start production at some 40 facilities in over 25 countries. In this position we sometimes act as the default “gatekeeper” for the technology and as such also often have to answer for failings in the technology when problems surface at the producer level.
- I assume most if not all present are familiar with the basics of what the ceramic pot filter is and how it’s made and functions so I won’t get involved here with that nor with an extensive Powerpoint. Our poster presentation illustrates the entire Potters for Peace production and start-up process. In this brief time I’ll touch on the use of our Best Practices document and problems with developing a partnership for starting production.

- Because PFP does not operate or have any financial interest in the filter shops we may have limited input with partners after our training and set up work. In the interests of strengthening our ability to have a voice in quality control issues we encourage all producers to stay in contact with us after starting production so as to participate in any sharing of knowledge which becomes available and facilitate problem solving.
- To inform potential partners as well as to help resolve technical problems we have many documents available two of which are especially valuable; a Best Practices document produced in 2011 by Justine Rayner and Daniele Lantagne with guidance from the Ceramics Manufacturing Working Group and the RDI Cambodia Production Manual. Potters for Peace has never produced a production manual perhaps because we have made use of the RDI Cambodia Production Manual since its creation by Mickey Sampson. There are some minor differences between RDI and PFP methods, mainly in the area of kiln design but the RDI manual is detailed and otherwise excellent.
- They are both in English only so in some locations use is limited.

- I carry hard copies of the Best Practices and RDI manual with me to ceramic filter consultancies and leave them with the facility when I leave. They are both in English only so in some locations use is limited.
- The Best Practices was created by surveying all the existing filter producers and reviewing the information for accuracy. It is written in such a way that the producers are mentioned often in relation to their methods which give an additional benefit of fomenting a feeling that the partners are part of an important worldwide project and everyone's opinion matters. Another possible future benefit to more unified production practices is some type of sanctioning or seal of approval.
- Our consultants generally spend about a month on site at a new facility for the production startup; our goals are to leave the partner with a usable clay/combustible formula and trained workers capable of carrying on in a fully equipped and functioning workshop. This time onsite is barely sufficient to carry this out and though we consider a return visit within a year almost a necessity we almost never do so. You can probably guess why – lack of funding. PFP cannot afford this and funding from outside is extremely difficult to find for an activity which is seen as “travel”. The partners rarely have this funding themselves and if they do are reluctant to use it for this, as a North American organization we are by default seen as wealthy. Unfortunately we sometimes have long standing requests from producers in good standing for follow-up technical visits but again paying for the trip is a problem.

- When we hear complaints about quality at one of our partner producers we have to approach the situation delicately with an offer of technical assistance and in some cases the relationship has soured when for instance the producer doesn't want to admit to the problem or perhaps will not work with us on funding the visit. To avoid such awkward situations we endeavor to form strong ties with partners from the start, of course except for the startup consultancy on site this can only be maintained by email or phone calls.
- PFP operates as Open Source so all this information is available through our website or email as well as via an ongoing technical blog and Facebook page maintained by Potters Without Borders.
- This is fine but has led to an occasional production facility starting unbeknownst to us until they run into a problem they can't resolve on their own, usually clay or kiln related, i.e. pottery skills, and request our help. This also happens when one of the several people working with ceramic filters outside of the PFP/PWB umbrella start a facility. The consultant working as an individual rather than as part of an organization does not have the resources for maintaining a long term relationship with many sources of information.
- There have been very positive results from motivated individuals setting up filter production on their own, Derek Chitwood a good example; he is presenting here at WaTER on some of his R&D.

- PFP is approached nearly every week by parties interested in starting a ceramic filter production facility. The inquiry can become a reality through a process involving extensive email and telephone exchanges wherein we provide verbal coaching and documents illustrating what will be needed. Ideally this is then followed by a week long, onsite, feasibility study which precedes the possible production startup;
- The majority of these inquiries however never go beyond the initial exchanges and we have generally had between 2-4 startups a year though in the last two years there have been fewer, so developing partners or “scaling up” from initial contacts seems to be a weak area on our process.
- Several problems present themselves at this early stage of developing a project;
- PFP is not realistic about what some of these inquiries are; simply seeking information on one of the water purification options available. They may end up not even taking on such a project or go with a different technology.
- The contact is unclear about what the ceramic filter is. In many cases they are looking for something which doesn't exist, though I have heard this so many times I can almost see it; a very simple handmade object which a family could make in their spare time, sitting around at home in the evenings. Something along these lines surfaced some years ago in Australia, as I remember it was a mix of clay and some household throwaway substance used as burn-out combustible, such as coffee grounds, press molded on one's elbow and fired in a simple pit firing. To some extent they work but we feel it would be irresponsible to encourage something so half baked, excuse the pun.

- In some cases the group is a bit more realistic but still is looking for a simpler option than what we offer; this may take the form of a hand made filter; coiled and smoothed for instance, in some kind of open mold and again, probably pit fired or in a primitive inappropriate kiln. To produce filters in this way is usually the vision of a group with no ceramics experience themselves but working with a group of very low-tech traditional potters.
- Funding – This is probably the biggest stumbling block, we are approached by an organization in the developing world that recognizes their local water problem and that the ceramic filter may be appropriate in their situation but they do not have the \$20,000 - \$40,000 necessary nor do they have contacts or experience developing contacts to find funding. Potters for Peace cannot fund projects and unfortunately we have not ourselves developed relationships with organizations which might fund such a project. We can point partners to sources which have provided funding in other locations, Oxfam for instance, and of course provide needed documentation but the partner must do the leg work. And at least in the case of Oxfam, each of their offices works very independently so the fact that they have funded groups in Colombia and the Dominican Republic may not translate to other locations.

- We have on several occasions arranged funding for a facility when we were approached by an entity, individual or church, say, which wanted to start a project, usually involving a specific community or local partner, and who then formed an arrangement with PFP to vet the proposed partner, handle the money and carry out our normal task of transferring the technology. This has been successful on several occasions and showed us that, contrary to an earlier belief we held, a financial commitment from the local partner was not necessarily needed.
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- Related to the above mentioned funding problems is a situation where a relatively large, successful U.S. based organization for instance wishes to start production in a developing world community where they are already involved but must look for outside funding. This can be difficult, I don't know why; one factor could be unfamiliarity by the possible funder with the ceramic filter.

- As I mentioned PFP's open source philosophy and the extensive information available on our website has allowed an increasing number of groups to start producing on their own. We have debated restricting access but do not foresee doing that. Independent startups are not always a bad thing by any means but on occasion greed gets the upper hand and an inferior product is put on the market. Some type of certification process would help ameliorate problems with independent producers and there is movement in that direction.
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- In our field there has long existed something of a disconnect between groups working on different potable water strategies. For instance a group involved with bore holes may not get involved with point of use filtration, the water provided from the bore holes is potable therefore their job is finished. This is true but we all know of the contaminated conditions existing in many developing world homes. Collaborations would help out here.