WN *Big Food Watch*

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Big Food Watch. Coca-Cola. Ekocenters™
The vision of Muhtar Kent



BIG FOOD WATCH

Access May 1998 New York Times feature on Coca-Cola in Africa here
Access January 2011 Carlos Monteiro on Coca-Cola in Africa here
Access July 2012 PLoS Medicine Carlos Monteiro, Geoffrey Cannon on Big Food here
Access February 2013 The Lancet 'Profits and pandemics' here
Access September 2013 Coca-Cola Ekocenter media release here





Three of the men behind the Ekocenter™ initiative. From left to right, Muhtar Kent, Coke CEO; genius inventor Dean Kamen; and Derk Hendricksen, a Coke global head power brand pusher

The Big Food Watch team reports:

Muhtar Kent, its chairman and chief operating officer (above, left) declares: 'Coca-Cola is more than a drink. It's an idea. It's a vision. It's a feeling'. He is seeing a number of visions. One is to teach the world to glug Coke™. Another, the topic of this *Big Food Watch*, is to bring clean drinking water to Africa. Enter Dean Kamen (the man in the blue denim with his portrait, centre), whose genius is even compared with that of Thomas Edison. With his team at his company DEKA, he invented the

Segway™ personal transporter, to fix city traffic jams; the Luke Skywalker™ brain-controlled prosthetic arm, to transform the lives of maimed servicemen; and the Slingshot™ water purifier, named after the David and Goliath Biblical story, using technology devised for kidney dialysis machines. The size of a washing machine, it can make 850 litres a day of drinking water from any source, even raw sewage.

There are snags, one being that the prototype costs $US 100, 000 a unit (1,2). For over ten years Dean Kamen has been seeking serious financing for mass production that he hopes could reduce the unit cost down to $US 2,000 and thus potentially bring affordable clean water to villages in rural Africa, and Latin America and Asia too. This is big, for water-borne diseases are variously estimated to kill something between 2 and 3.5 million people every year, most of whom are young children.

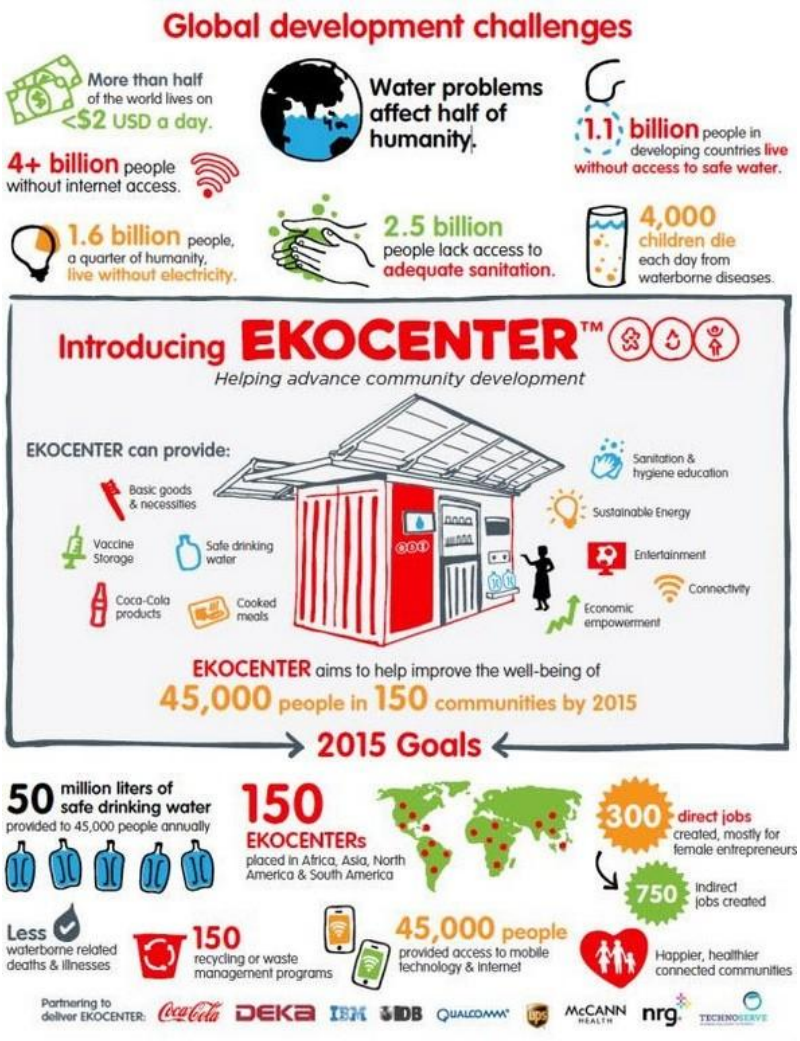
Now Dean Kamen has inspired Muhtar Kent, which is where Derk Hendrickson (above, right), comes in. He is TCCC (The Coca-Cola Corporation) 'Senior Director for Portfolio Strategy and Commercialization for Global Sparkling Brands'. His experience 'includes global strategy and plan development for Coke™ brands'. He formerly worked for RJ Reynolds Tobacco, well-known for its Joe Camel™ branding. Now he is corporate leader of the Ekocenter™ project. The Slingshot™ (below, right) now has a new brand image, with the Coca-Cola logo and red livery.

Ekocenters are launched…or are they…



Ekocenters. Left, the business partners led by Coca-Cola, at the launch held at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York. Right, the Slingshot water purifier in its bright Coca-Cola brand uniform

Muhtar Kent (right, above) is lyrical about the initiative. At its launch in New York he said (3): 'Ekocenter represents an investment in the future prosperity and progress of some of the most fragile and at-risk communities we serve… Through Ekocenter we have the ability to change lives by offering access to safe drinking water and other needed resources, all while empowering local entrepreneurs. What started as an aspiration is now becoming a reality as we welcome our partners across the golden triangle of business, government and civil society to scale and improve this innovation'. So far nobody from government or civil society seems to be involved.



The challenge, and the opportunity for Muhtar Kent's 'golden triangle' of business, government and civil society. Above, Coke's graphic explanation of the Ekocenter™ business partnership initiative

'We're getting enough of a coalition together that this idea is becoming a reality' said Dean Kamen (next to Muhtar Kent in the picture). He boomed the initiative. 'Like a lot of new ideas that go from indefensible to indispensable once visionary leaders get behind them, this little machine has the potential, in a relatively short time, to transform the number-one health problem of today into a problem of the past'.

The Coca-Cola media release states: 'The Coca-Cola Company, DEKA, IBM, Inter-American Development Bank Group, McCann Health, NRG Energy, Qualcomm Technologies, and UPS' (whose representatives also shown in the line-up above) 'today announced they will work together to bring Ekocenter™ – a kiosk designed to improve the well-being of communities – to 20 countries by the end of 2015… We will place between 1,500 and 2,000 units in the form of Ekocenter 'downtowns in a box', or Slingshot™ water purification systems to deliver further services beyond clean water, in Africa, Asia, Latin America and North America by the end of 2015'.



The prototype Ekocenter™ installed in Heidelberg, near Johannesburg, South Africa. Within it are the Slingshot™, a power source, and lots of space to sell Coca-Cola food and drink products

Fuzzy prospectus

The media release continued: 'Each Ekocenter™ will offer a locally tailored mix of products, services and resources that may include safe drinking water, sustainable energy, wireless communications, refrigerated vaccination storage, health education, and other functionality to jump-start entrepreneurship opportunities and community development. Through this commitment, we aim to deliver 500 million liters of safe drinking water, while promoting greater local development in communities that need it most'. The release is carefully worded, using the words 'may' and 'we aim'. Where the resources will come for vaccination (does this imply a partnership between Coca-Cola and the World Health Organization?) and whose health education may be offered (might this be devised by Coca-Cola?) is so far not clear. Reading between the lines, the prospectus is curiously fuzzy.

Most accounts of the Ekocenter™ initiative are ecstatic, and have puffed the Coca-Cola media release, without attention to words like 'may'. The trade journal *International Business Times* said (4): 'By end 2015, the Coca-Cola Company will be launching 1,500 to 2,000 Ekocenters or mini one-stop shops that will supply cooked meals, clean water, power, Internet, vaccines and Coke products to 20 developing countries', including in North America. 'Each of the Ekocenters will be run by a woman with the company's goal to make them the center of communities who do not have access to water and power. The kiosks, made up of repurposed shipping containers, will be built in solar panels with a water purification system. "We're calling it a downtown in a box" said Serena Levy, Coca-Cola spokesman'.

A note of caution emerged. 'However, it is still not yet clear if any of the offered services in the Ekocenters will be provided to the consumers for free. Coca-Cola is still polishing its business model and will announce soon whether it will provide free services or will charge a minimum fee. "We're still working on the business model", Levy said'. There is also a puzzle. The Coca-Cola media release refers to 1,500-2,000 Ekocenters™. But the graphic supplied by Coca-Cola (above) refers to 150 centres.

Plenty of sizzle, but…

Thanks no doubt to Derk Hendricksen and his brand image masterminds, Coca-Cola has certainly projected an impression of a real intention to prevent child deaths from water-borne diseases, and also to regenerate and empower local communities. There are already many other nationally and locally-sourced initiatives in the global South whose purpose is to clean up water supplies and to ensure safe community and household water, without massive capital outlays or commercial trade-offs. Likewise, the World Health Organization, other relevant UN agencies, and international and locally-based civil society organisations, are already acting to prevent and control water-borne diseases. It would be unfortunate if Coca-Cola's ramping up the Ekocenter™ initiative gave anybody the impression that Africa and other regions in the global South have to depend on support from foreign capital, and deals involving endorsement and promotion of foreign ultra-processed branded ready-to-consume products that undermine and eventually destroy traditional food cultures.

Meanwhile, Muhtar Kent is projecting the Coca-Cola corporation as socially responsible beyond normal expectation. There is a trade-off, for Ekocenters™ will be seen for what they also are, which is vending machines for Coca-Cola products, as well as sources of clean water. Realists will say, if governments and the UN system won't or can't act effectively, industry can do so, and should step in, with all its energy, technical know-how, and business development muscle.

But there is also room for scepticism. First, there is so far nothing much more than the prototype Ekocenter™ actually operating. Only one Ekocenter™ has landed. The promise being made is for the end of 2015. Plus it is strange that Coca-Cola should trumpet the initiative without an agreed business model. Plus so far the totality of involvement is industrial, with no concrete reference to UN agencies, national governments, or civil society organisations. Plus is there even a single example of an agreement to a feasible working arrangement in which local organisations and people in say Africa are real partners.

Suppose it proves impossible to get the unit price of a Slingshot™ down below say $US 10,000, way beyond the means of rural communities? What happens then? Will Coke pick up the tab? But even supposing all goes to the plan as indicated, a look at the Ekocenter™ graphic shows that the initiative as posted on the Coca-Cola website projects 150, not 1,500-2,000, rural 'downtowns in a box'. The plan projects 300 jobs created, and 45,000 people with access to clean water. That would be useful, but could never justify any impression given that Coca-Cola is able to fix water-borne diseases. In the words of the public relations saying, Ekocenters™ seem so far to be sizzle, but no steak. We do though know the reason for the name 'Ekocenter'. Its first four characters backwards spell 'Coke'.

Box 1

Big Food Watch. Monitoring Muhtar

The Big Food Watch team concludes. Coca-Cola chairman and chief executive officer Muhtar Kent is a mighty mogul. With the Ekocenter™ initiative he and his brand image and product projection team have achieved a massive public relations coup. He and they may have succeeded so far in giving UN agencies, national governments, and professional and civil society organisations, the impression that Coke is pledged to be a real leader in the prevention and control of water-borne diseases. These kill anything between 2 and 3.5 million people, mostly children, every year.

But this wizardry has been wrought without any substantial firm financial commitment and apparently even without an agreed business and strategy plan. Even if all goes according to the impression given by the corporation's media releases, it seems from the graphic shown above, also supplied by Coca-Cola, that as from two years' time, the optimistic estimate is the creation of 300 jobs and clean water supplied to 45,000 people. The vehicle for the water supply seems to be, judging from the picture of the Ekocenter shown above, to be mostly a kiosk selling Coca-Cola ultra-processed food and drink products.

Stripped of the Coke spin, what we may really be seeing is micro-convenience stores selling Coke products and offering Coke propaganda, and justifying Coke's privatisation of the water resources of Africa, elsewhere in the South – and even in North America.

WN will welcome and will publish a reasoned note of explanation, correction or clarification from Muhtar Kent, now, and at any time this year when concrete progress is made. We believe that he should now guarantee that Coca-Cola will supply fully equipped 1,500-2,000 Ekocenters™ (or else acknowledge that he got his math wrong by a factor of 10 and more) at a stated price independently assessed as affordable by impoverished rural communities in Africa, Asia and Latin America. We will look forward to his additional guarantee that Ekocenters™ will not sell any sugared or syruped food or drink products, and that the water supplied in Ekocenters™ will be, as all tap water should be, supplied free of charge.

References and notes

1 Slingshot information on Wikipedia can be accessed at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slingshot (water_vapor_distillation_system)

2 A somewhat skeptical appraisal is on http://www.appropedia.org/ Slingshot_water_purifier

3 Ekocenters. Coca-Cola press release, 24 September 2013. http://www.coca-colacompany. com/press-center/press-releases/coca-cola-launches-global-ekocenter-partnership-to-deliver-safe-drinking-water-and-basic-necessities-to-rural-communities. *Access pdf here*

4 Somoset J. Coca-Cola to introduce one-stop food Ekocenters. *International Business Times,* 8 October 2013. http://au.ibtimes.com/articles/512143/20131008/coca-cola-coke-ekocenters-water-power-business.htm.

Status

Big Food Watch convenor Fabio Gomes writes: The *Big Food Watch* network includes leaders of public interest organisations and social movements, advised by UN and government officials, legislators, scientists, and other professionals. My thanks go to them all. Thanks also to Geoffrey Cannon as *WN* editor, who with others encouraged the creation of *Big Food Watch* in discussions during congresses held between 2009 and 2012 in São Paulo, Porto, Como, Seoul, Santiago, Rio de Janeiro and Havana. Declaration: I believe that the protection and support of public health in all its aspects needs to come from public sources. If this is a competing interest I declare it.

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