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The Inequality of Clean Drinking Water: A Reflection on the United States, Mexico, Ecuador
and India

When we fill up a glass of water from the tap back in the United States, we are never grateful that this drinking water is so readily available to us. Instead, we flavor it, filter it, add fluoride to it, or do just about anything in order to change how it tastes when it comes out of our kitchen faucet. Rarely do we ever think about just how lucky we are that we not only have running water coming out of our faucet, but that there is hardly any chance we will get seriously ill if we drink this water. Even if we hate the taste or believe it to be less than ideal for drinking, the reality is that in the United States we have constant access to clean drinking water. Millions of people around the world are not as fortunate as we are and either do not have running water or do not have access to clean drinking water. The contrast of such inequality, even between many developing countries that I have been to such as Mexico, Ecuador and India, is incredibly stark. This reflection will attempt to understand and compare the inequalities seen between the four countries in terms of access, or lack of access, to clean drinking water for the majority of each country's population.

When I worked in a rural village in southern Mexico in 2010, we did not have consistent access to running water. The water we received had to be pumped into each house's individual water container, which then used gravity to flow from the container down into the sink. When this water was available, there was no way it was safe to drink.

We did, however, have access to purified water in the form of five gallon jugs that would be delivered every week or so. When the water ran out early, it tended to be cheaper to just buy soda or other carbonated beverages than refill the drinking water, which led to other health problems such as obesity and poor nutrition. Even at the age of 16, I could tell the disparity in the availability to drinking water between the United States and that village in rural Mexico was great. I did not, however, anticipate two more experiences in recent years that would broaden that disparity even more.

Earlier this year, I spent four months living in Quito, Ecuador during my co-op. Quito is a big city, but it is still in a developing country and with that comes similar worries about drinking the water that comes from the tap. Even though running water was never an issue, no one would ever recommend drinking that water. As an American living in a nice apartment, I personally never had to worry about whether or not I would have clean water to drink because my co-op employer would have someone deliver purified water every couple of days to my apartment. However, it was clear that the majority of the population was not in the same position as I was and did about their drinking water supply.

Restaurants in Quito do not serve tap water like they do in the United States and my co-op employer always recommended sanitizing any fruit or vegetable after washing it with my tap water. At the time, I looked at this as an inconvenience, but after spending the past month in India, I consider even that pain of washing vegetables to be something to take for granted. I was lucky enough to have water flowing freely out of my faucet every day in Ecuador, unlike in Mexico and unlike many people in India, and I was lucky enough to never have to worry about having clean water to drink in my apartment. While I usually had the latter in Mexico, it was not always something that could be guaranteed and I know

that for many people in India, they never have the luxury of having readily available drinking water.

India has been an incredibly eye-opening experience in so many ways. The lack of clean drinking water for such a large portion of the population, however, is something that I do not think I will ever be able to forget. Through our classes and cultural visits, this inequality is so stark and ever-present that it is hard to forget. I have seen a lot of poverty in many developing countries across the world, but I do not think I have ever seen it quite so vast before. Usually when you see children or adults begging on the street in the US or even places in Latin America, they are begging for food or money, but in India they are frequently asking for water above everything else. Not only have I never seen this kind of poverty before, but also the idea that there are so many people out there in the world who do not even have any water, clean or otherwise, is really hard for me to process. Seeing people who are so grateful to have someone's half-drunken water bottle or even dirty water to drink makes me feel upset that in the United States we are ungrateful for the water that we have.

The disparity and inequality in how clean drinking water is distributed amongst nations is something that I will now think about a lot more as I continue to travel this year and in the future. I never thought that the inequality in something we see as so basic would be so visible throughout the world, but water is a fundamental tool for survival and without access to water and especially drinking water, survival is difficult. This has made me even more thankful to have the water I do in the US and will make me think a lot more about how and when I use it and especially how lucky I am to have it to drink every day.