Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) has been plagued for decades by insecurity, poverty, and poor health outcomes. Humanitarian aid has become a fixture in the local economy, particularly for essential services, like water and healthcare. Many parts of this region are stable enough for economic investment in long-term development. But continuous humanitarian aid can perpetuate vicious cycles of dependency and rob Congolese of the opportunity to design and manage sustainable solutions for themselves.

Asili is a Congolese social enterprise that flips the script. It reinvents humanitarian aid as as startup capital for self-sustaining businesses, designed and operated by and for the people that need them. Founded on the belief that everyone, no matter how poor, deserves the dignity of choosing to pay for quality, Asili’s clean water points and world-class health facilities now serve 120,000 people daily at genuinely affordable prices.

Our neighborhood never had clean water or a health clinic that could give us quality medicines and treatments. Since Asili arrived, things have changed. We drink Asili water, which has helped our lives. And the clinic actually heals us. Asili doesn’t discriminate—it’s one of the reasons I chose this clinic.
NOTICING

DRC ranks 175 out of 189 countries on the 2020 Human Development Index. Eastern Congo, in particular, is characterized by cycles of conflict, faltering infrastructure, market disruptions, poverty, gender-based violence, food insecurity, and more. Despite tens of billions in foreign aid delivered to the country since the turn of the millennium, it’s still hard to find clean water and health facilities are still understaffed and regularly run out of medicine.

INTERPRETING

Despite the complexity of the Congolese context, perpetual humanitarian aid in regions and sectors that are no longer in a state of emergency only adds to the complexity. Sustainable, long-term development is necessary to break the cycles of poverty and conflict, which is only possible by disrupting international aid dependency—both economically and in terms of mindset. Asili, a project of Eastern Congo Initiative, believes that supporting Congolese-led organizations as they develop and implement Congolese-developed solutions is the most effective way of moving the country forward on a path of progress.

FEELING EMPATHY

The community was involved in every aspect of creating Asili. Co-design sessions with Alight, an international humanitarian organization, and Ideo.org, a nonprofit design studio, uncovered their desires and ideas for everything from the service structure to the clinic layout to the logo. By inserting community members directly into the design process itself, the team grasped so much more than it could have by simply interviewing them. They learned about social dynamics, how power should be balanced in the community, and how a service that treats people like consumers might have a chance at sustainability.

‘Human-centered design allowed us to build with the community at the center,’ said Abraham Leno, executive director of Eastern Congo Initiative. A former refugee himself, Leno explains, ‘Global society has not always been able to see things through our eyes. Most times when someone is categorized as helpless, it takes away a lot of power from you. That needs to change. Here your opinion matters.’

TAKING ACTION

Since its launch in 2014, Asili now has a network of co-located water points and health clinics that offer world-class quality in six “zones” that serve 120,000 Congolese customers per day. Within five years, the first water kiosks were operating profitably. Furthermore, Asili is entirely led and run by Congolese, from the director to the healthcare providers to the operations team, embedding long-term trust, sustainability, and future innovation in the community. And all the water points are run by women who live in the communities, elevating their status and generating family income.