

Innovation to Promote the SDGs

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Addressing the Sustainable Development Goals will require many billions of dollars in funding, as well as posing enormous hurdles in coordination and governance. How do we ensure that support arrives at those who need it most? How do we ensure that individuals and firms are furthering the cause of sustainable development, rather than detracting from it? Why would they be willing to work towards it in the first place? Innovation and close relationships with firms in the private sector may help address some sustainable development challenges in areas where regulations are weak or poorly enforced, or where funding is insufficient to pursue development by traditional means. Innovative solutions – either new technologies or practices, or technologies and practices applied in new ways – can lower costs for firms sufficiently such that actions that advance sustainable development are those that bear the lowest cost. Thus, private firms can be incentivized not only to act in ways that promote sustainable development, but in fact be the driving force behind it. Ultimately, actions based on self-interest are far more durable than reactions to temporary public pressure or bona-fide goodwill.

This paper will present a case study on the implementation of evaporative cooling vest programs in Qatar and the UAE. It will explore the incentives facing firms and other key local and international stakeholders. Evaporative cooling vests, typically used in sports and other niche industries, were reapplied to reduce the strain on workers from occupational exposure to high temperatures. In the UAE and Qatar, the majority of low-skilled labour in the construction industry is of foreign origin, bearing limited protections from their host governments. The ongoing roll-out of evaporative cooling vest programs is financed primarily by the construction firms themselves, seeing a public opinion and worker productivity benefits. It will present the findings from interviews with government and NGO officials and academia in the UAE, Qatar, and Canada, as well as evidence from evaporative cooling vests trials by Canadian NGO aegis.