

INTERVIEW



A passionate entrepreneur with over fifty years of experience across several sectors, including manufacturing, banking, and construction, Dr. Alberto Fenix is introducing the state-of-the-art One World Filter (OWF) water filtration technology in the Philippines, the first country to debut the system in the world. As a leader always looking out for this people, Dr. Fenix talks to VoL about his initiatives uplifting Filipinos' quality of life and educational training.

Spotlight on the Philippines



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Voices of Leaders: Could you tell us about your professional background?

Dr. Alberto Fenix: I'm a business entrepreneur. Even when I was studying, I always thought I'd become an entrepreneur, either starting a business or taking over a business to make it grow. That's what I've been doing since I came back to the Philippines.

I could have stayed in the U.S. and have had a good life. As a student with a student visa, I was allowed to work full time for 18 months without having to get a green card. I did that, so I worked in an investment house, the Boston Company, for about 18 months before I came home. I worked there as an investment analyst, so I learned about valuing companies, and what made them worthwhile investments. When I came home, I first set up a managing consulting company but I ended up joining the people I was dealing with to run the company. When I joined them, I also invested. I worked in so many fields — manufacturing, banking, both investment and commercial banking, steel manufacturing and construction. But I always looked for places that always interested me.

As an entrepreneur, I always wanted to either found or take over some companies and make them grow and create jobs for people, I'd say I created about 20,000 jobs in the past in the different companies I've been in.

VoL: How did you first discover One World Filter to eventually become the Philippine distributor?

AF: I got to know about One World Filter from Toni Erickson, the CEO of One World Filter Corporation and the one marketing and selling the OWF filters being made by Dr. Evan Koslow, the foremost authority on water filtration. I first referred some companies who could have become the country group distributor for the Philippines, but finally after going through all the information about One World Filter, I saw that it was something new and revolutionary in terms of water filtration. I saw that it promised to be the cheapest,

most affordable system that can deliver clean drinking water. Much of the water now is from the tap, and we cannot rely on drinking water from there. In these municipal water systems, they clean it by sand filtration, which basically takes away the bigger contaminants, and they put chlorine to kill germs. But there are also long term effects of intaking too much chlorine, that's also a health issue.

One World Filter is not a traditional filtering system. The science behind it is that the nano filter, which has very small nano fibers in effect have a negative charge, the filter has a positive charge. One World Filter is a pack of three filters, the first is a sediment filter, to remove big sized sediments, and then there's a carbon filter next to that, and then the nano filter is the last. So to some extent there's already filtration on the first 2 filters, then the impurities that pass through the first two are captured by the nano filter, and they aren't captured because of small holes in the nano filter – they're captured because

when they pass through the nanofibers, they grab it because of the charge. That's the science behind the filter which makes it a different kind of filter. It's not the usual filter where you have minute holes where the water can pass through but the rest of the impurities cannot pass through. What happens with those filters is that when it gets full, the filter also stops working and you must replace these.

That's where the business comes in because the normal filter pack for a family of 6 will last for 1 month before it stops filtering. That's on the basis of 540 litres per month that's needed for a family of 6 drinking 3 litres per day. It's a very elegant solution that comes from Dr. Koslow. As I'm a technology guy myself — I said that it was a different thing, that's not a filter! It's something else! It's a wonderful business because it's a replacement business. I sell a starter set of the dispenser and the filters that last one month, and the following month, another filter needs to be bought to replace one that is full.

When I approached my friends who are in the water business or in retail about One World Filter, they said they could sell it for us but they didn't want to be an importer. Because what is needed also on my part is to manufacture the dispenser locally, this is what's being done right now and our first product will be in the production run by 1st March. We will have the dispensers available in March, that's when I'm launching it. The Philippines will be the first to come out with it. By leading the way, I make it possible for One World Filter Corporation to sign up other countries.

VoL: What has been the reaction of people about One World Filter?

AF: That it's really affordable. The dispensers will be sold at the retail price of Php1,200 (USD24), and the filter pack Php130 (USD2.50), so basically you'll be spending that per month for a family of six. If you divide that by the number of gallons, it comes out to about 15 centavos per litre, or 60 centavos per gallon. You go to a water refilling station for a 5 gallon container that you ask them

to refill, supposedly the water is purified through osmosis, but you're still not sure if that water is really clean. The lowest price would be 6 pesos per gallon, versus 60 centavos per gallon on our system.

It's also very convenient, it's a household appliance sitting in your counter in the kitchen. I don't have to bring my 5 gallon container and have it refilled somewhere.

VoL: What made you decide to distribute the OWF system in the Philippines?

AF: The big reason is that it makes a difference in people's lives, this is really why I got into this business. The One World Filter Corporation is allied with the One World Filter Foundation where Judy Ryan is the president, and the idea is that part of the profits would be donated to One World Filter Foundation and then they would get these units and give them away. It is estimated that the neediest people in the world are about 840 million. The Water for All Initiative of the OWF Foundation gets donations and then buys these units to give away. In March 2020, we will be doing that, we are going to be distributing the first units for communities that we're selecting now, one in a slum area in Manila, another one in Marawi where they resettled people, and another one in a community by Taal Volcano and another one in an Aeta community. Water in all these places is a problem and in relation to their total income, which might be about 2 dollars per day is the poverty level incidence threshold, they can't afford water, so they'd have to get water from the Pasig River and then boil it. But even if you do that, you can't be sure the contaminants will be removed. Secondly, boiling the water also removes some of the minerals and nutrients in the water.

Water is the number one basic necessity. Second is food, third is shelter. More than 50% of diseases are waterborne. I just read a scientific paper that said that the coronavirus can survive in water, and it survives longer in water than in the air. So if you're drinking contaminated water, you're going to get it. In hospitals where there are people infected, it's dangerous to drink the water there. Even drinking bottled water might not be safe.

VoL: What challenges do you foresee in distributing OWF over the first few years?

AF: The number of families in the Philippines who are below the poverty line is now 24%. There are 108 million Filipinos, so there's 18 million households, which means there are over 4 million households below the poverty line. I cannot make a dent in that, my production rate is roughly 480,000 per year and

since I'm the first one that will have the product available, and the OWF Foundation will be purchasing 250,000 units on this first year, I'll only have 230,000 to be able to sell here.

VoL: Given your long professional background, what are your thoughts on impact investment in the Philippines, and the changing business paradigm that also considers positive impacts along with profit?

AF: I don't think there has been a change, it's just that there are businessmen that have this orientation, and there are other businessmen that are about profit only. They get bigger profit because they pay their people very low and exploit it and don't pay taxes. But I've always been on this side of the fence where I really take care of my people, and I can see them responding to me and saying that I'm a good leader. I always look out for them and want them to get better, and get better pay. I can think of many companies where they started with minimum wage and today are making so much more compared to when they started. For example, I took over one company which is in the pulp and paper business, I got a German partner. When I took over, the people were getting 30 pesos per day, immediately, I made it 60. And every year after that, they were making so many increases because we had better productivity. I could afford to pay them because I also put in new equipment that increased their productivity, their production per man hour. This is the way I operate in all the companies that I've been president of.

VoL: The Philippine economy has been regaining momentum, what would you say are the factors behind this?

AF: Ever since we started having a growth rate of at least 7%, we've been on a growth trajectory. At the last quarter of 2019, we still grew at around 6.5 or 6.6%. A major part of this is our foreign remittances from our overseas workers. In my understanding, we have 10% of the population that's out of the country, either as OFWs (Overseas Foreign Workers) or as immigrants who still have ties home and sends money home to their families. You can say that those remittances are our biggest export, in fact that's really a service export. The effect of that is, they send the money here and that's used for consumer spending by their relatives that are here, so that has created a boom in retail. In the Philippines, we're still building malls left and right! It's still a consumer economy.

VoL: It's been said many times that the Filipino people are the country's biggest asset, what do you think distinguishes the Filipino worker?

AF: With Industry 4.0, the kinds of jobs and occupations of the future will change, but what I can say is that I'm not afraid for the Filipino human resources because we are very good at work which requires a human touch. Those can never be automated.

What is needed in automation and artificial intelligence are IT people, and Filipinos are adept at it. We have this advantage here, but our educational training is not preparing them properly for that. We have to change our mindset about the things we should be looking at and focusing on. Another area is healthcare, everybody says Filipina nurses and caregivers are the best in the world but again we have to train them properly and give them documentation so that they don't have to feel inferior or second class. We have to be able to give them confidence to say that they're world class! And that's proven, Filipino workers are sought after in many parts of the world.

