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The Giving Guide

Small Ways to Make

A Big Difference

By STEVE MOLLMAN

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Who says philanthropy and profit can't mix?

In a Chinese province near the Tibetan border, two women -- one from Hong Kong, the other from Taiwan -- are helping thousands of yak herders build a better life for their families through a new social enterprise called Shokay. The company buys downy yak fiber from the herders and makes upscale "yashmere" blankets and sweaters for sale to wealthy city dwellers. In Cambodia, nonprofit International Development Enterprises helps local farmers get simple, foot-operated water pumps that are boosting family incomes. But it's no handout; the farmers have to purchase the pumps.



Asia is seeing a shift "from checkbook philanthropy to engaged social investment," says Michael Liffman, director of the Asia-Pacific Centre for Philanthropy and Social Investment at Swinburne University in Melbourne.

Weekend Journal decided to find some examples of organizations taking fresh, innovative approaches to philanthropy around the region, and to see what inspired their founders. They range from nonprofit institutions to for-profit enterprises to hybrids that pair both concepts.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ENTERPRISES

Cambodian farmer Tep Vey • www.ideorg.org

On his treadle

water pump

Tep Vey lives in a ramshackle hut about 90 minutes southeast of Phnom Penh. He owns a handful of small fields around his hut, and a few larger ones nearby. It's beautiful where he lives -- vibrant green rice paddies extending into the distance under a big blue sky -- and life should be good.

It's better since the lanky 48-year-old farmer went into debt to buy a foot-operated treadle pump four years ago. Until then, he had no way to water his fields during Cambodia's long dry season.

GIVING TILL IT HELPS



Many social enterprises help artisans or laborers in poor countries and offer consumers

something of value at the same time. Buy a gift from one of these and you can, with very little effort, do a bit of good in the world. [Here's our guide.](#)

The crude pump, which could easily be mistaken for a broken section of the wobbly stick fence next to it, cost \$10, which he had to borrow. An additional \$40 went into boring a hole to reach the water underneath his land. But Mr. Vey recouped his investment in one season. Now the fields near his hut, which used to lie fallow during the dry season, yield a crop of cucumbers, cabbages, long beans and dry-season rice that puts an extra \$100 in his pocket each year.

Instead of using the newfound income to improve his family's living conditions, such as by building an outhouse, he is paying fees so that the two youngest of his six children can attend public school. His hope is that one day they will be able to land office jobs.

International Development Enterprises designs and tests affordable products for rural poor, such as ceramic water purifiers and irrigation systems, and then kick-starts the local markets so that small merchants, who are themselves quite poor, can profit by making and selling the products to farmers like Mr. Vey. Its methods are influenced by its American founder Paul Polak's earlier career in psychiatry: He figures the best way to help is to get inside the end-user's head by going where farmers live and work to understand their daily routines.

In Mr. Vey's case, his land, which lies within the upper reaches of the Mekong River delta, sits atop a sandy aquifer deposited over the millennia by floodwaters. Once a hole was drilled, pressure forced the water up to near the surface. The treadle pump takes it from there, using suction power to draw the water up through a nozzle and into Mr. Vey's dented tin bucket. To date, about two million such treadle pumps have been sold through IDE programs in Bangladesh, Myanmar, Vietnam, Nepal and Cambodia, as well as in Africa.



Tep Vey's farm in Cambodia

Now Mr. Vey is considering another IDE product: a drip-irrigation system, for which he says he'll have to borrow \$30.

HOW TO HELP: IDE is a large nonprofit organization with branches in many countries. It accepts online donations starting at \$50. Go to www.ideorg.org and click Support IDE, where you can also learn of other ways to give, such as corporate matching gifts. You can't donate to a particular farmer, but you can give to a particular country, or possibly to a project in that country. The site has links to specific countries to contact the country manager directly.

VENTURES IN DEVELOPMENT

- www.venturesindev.org

How do you boost incomes for nomads in western China who might live seven hours from any roadside, much less a marketplace? First step: check their possessions for any sign of untapped value.

That's what graduate students Marie So, a 28-year-old from Hong Kong, and Carol Chyau, a 26-year-old Taiwanese, did last year on a break from studying development work at Harvard University. The goal of their six-week journey was to find a social problem and then fix it in a profitable and sustainable manner.

The duo ended up visiting impoverished rural nomads on the Tibetan plateau. They noticed that in the winter, the nomads kept the yaks huddled near their huts, and in the summer they moved further up into the mountains and set them grazing. Why not, the students wondered, figure out a way to extract more value from these animals?

Today, their for-profit social enterprise Shokay (www.shokay.com) buys yak fiber from more than 3,000 "suppliers" (nomads) in Qinghai province and weaves it into scarves, blankets and throws that are sold at high-end shops in Hong Kong, Taipei and the U.S. Another enterprise, Mei Xiang Yak Cheese, does something similar with yak milk, though on a smaller scale.

Profits from both ventures are plowed into Ventures in Development, their Hong Kong-registered nonprofit organization, from which they draw salaries. The money then goes toward social programs and community research. This year, for instance, nomads too poor to own a yak can rent one and sell its fiber to Shokay; they'll also receive training on how to comb out only the yak's soft down fiber, which is the good stuff. In addition, Shokay has set up a knitting cooperative aimed at giving women, in particular, more income opportunities.

Eventually, Ms. So and Ms. Chyau plan for their umbrella organization, Ventures in Development, to serve mainly as support for other social entrepreneurs in the region, through skills, knowledge or funding.

"There are so many entrepreneurs in the region," says Ms. So. "People really need to challenge themselves and rethink philanthropy. It's a matter of combining elements: really understanding a social problem, finding a social need, and thinking of innovative and sustainable ways to do it."

HOW TO HELP: Contact the organization directly at info@venturesindev.org. Donations will be used as seed money for future start-ups, or expansion of existing ones, or for research into new projects in southeast China, where it wants to expand.

--Steve Mollman is an Asia-based writer.

