

Using Untapped Resources To Develop Social Enterprise

December 3, 2007 in [Social Enterprises](#), [Social Entrepreneurship](#)



Developing new social enterprise activities does not have to take the form of a brand new business venture that your organisation has never done before.

In fact, in our Business Planning for Social Entrepreneurs course, we teach that often the most effective social enterprise activities are developed from under-utilised resources that an organisation already has.

For example, a community centre whose room hire capacity is not as high as it could be, the voluntary organisation that has a colour photocopier, binder and laminator offering a service to others, staff with specific skills and knowledge that could work with other organisations who do not have that level of experience.

What resources have you got that you are not using to their fullest potential?

I love this example from Tibet.

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.