

Clue: A major city



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Waking the elephant

New concepts for fighting poverty, disease and climate change are opening up, says Ken Burnett

Ken Burnett
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Black fever, also known as kala-azar, is the world's most deadly parasitic disease after malaria. Each year it kills around 500,000 people, who rapidly lose weight and die painfully with swollen livers and spleens. Black fever kills men, women and children indiscriminately but its victims are united by one factor that alone explains why, until now, the disease has been uncontrolled.

Years ago a treatment for black fever was found; however the pharmaceutical companies saw no profit in it simply because all who suffer from black fever are poor. So the drug was shelved.

Now a remarkable new kind of charity, a not-for-profit pharmaceutical company called the Institute for One World Health, has resurrected the shelved drug, paromomycin, proved its efficacy to the Indian government and, with funds from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, is planning to make it available in the worst affected parts of India. In tests 94.6% of patients treated with Paromomycin were cured. The drug costs just \$10 per patient, less than one-tenth of any available alternative.

Having proved the concept, the IOWH is moving on to tackle the big killers, malaria and diarrhoea.

The institute is brainchild of a remarkable American woman, Dr Victoria Hale. Its mission is to develop safe, affordable medicines for people with neglected diseases in the developing world. Herself a chemist, Dr Hale saw that these diseases could only be tackled by effective drug therapies. But to make these affordable to the world's poor, she realised that the profit motive, traditionally so important for pharmaceutical companies, had to be removed.

Before attracting the funding their idea deserves, Dr Hale and her husband devoted two and a half years and much of their money to building the IOWH as a new kind of non-profit enterprise, the first non-profit pharmaceutical company in the world. Hopefully, they've blazed a trail others will follow.

They believe age-old problems won't be tackled with traditional solutions. A new era of entrepreneurial voluntary action needs to open up.

There's much that such innovative enterprises could do, and not just in pharmaceuticals. Why not encourage non-profit seed companies, management consultants, travel companies, water companies, even non-profit training companies?

The search for practical solutions to world problems by Dr Ashok Khosla and his organisation, Development Alternatives, based in Delhi, has led to sustainable fuels, woodstoves, unfired bricks, roof tiles, weaving machines and water management schemes. DA is a member of the Zero-Emission Research and Initiatives network (Zeri), perhaps the most successful hybrid commercial and non-profit.

In an 11-year project in Colombia, Zeri has collaborated with a local social enterprise, Las Gaviotas, to convert more than 8,000 hectares of useless savannah into lush rainforest rich in biodiversity absorbing thousands of tonnes of carbon dioxide emissions annually. From this they have created jobs converting biomass into diesel fuel and collecting now abundant water, which they sell commercially in plastic bottles that can be recycled as building bricks.

In collaboration with development agencies, governments and bankers JP Morgan they plan to regenerate 225,000 hectares in the next three years and, if successful, a further 6m hectares after that. And they are reducing social tensions behind the violence that usually blights development in Colombia.

I came across Dr Khosla and his projects at the Seventeenth South Asia Fundraising Conference, held this September in Agra, India. It wasn't the only radical approach to solving world problems that I stumbled upon there.

Major-General Surat Sandhu, formerly head of fundraising for Helpage India and now an independent consultant to India's growing voluntary sector, is also chair of this conference, attended by 250 fundraisers and not-for-profit activists from across Asia. Surat - who can be contacted here - has a radical view of how foreign charities (including British donors) could best fight poverty in India.

'Twenty per cent of Indians are comfortably off', says Surat. 'There are 200 million middle-class people here. Eight hundred thousand of them are high net worth individuals. Yet there are no specialist major donor fundraisers to be found in India. Indian NGOs can't raise the money that's available here because there are far too few trained professional fundraisers.

'The best way for the Oxfams, Save the Childrens and their likes to fight poverty in India would be to devote just one per cent of their current development aid to train and equip talented, enthusiastic Indian graduates to be fundraisers. This alone could awake the sleeping elephant that is Indian philanthropic giving.'

Thanks to astute analysis and intelligent, entrepreneurial funding, DA, Zeri and the IOWH have shown the difference their creative initiatives can make. With its talent for innovative high- and low-tech solutions, maybe India is just the place for this spirit to flourish. But are western NGOs similarly prepared to think and act differently? Or will Indian voluntary organisations have to provide these solutions on their own?

- Ken Burnett. is a trustee of ActionAid International and BookAid International. He writes for SocietyGuardian.co.uk in a private capacity and the views expressed here are his own.

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