

FAST COMPANY

Barefoot Is Better

Bunker Roy says entrepreneurship, not massive aid programs, will solve mass poverty.

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Last September, in an op-ed published in the *International Herald Tribune*, a virtual unknown outside of nonprofit circles slammed the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, the framework for a massive global antipoverty effort, as a "recipe for disaster" doomed to "be achieved only on paper." Jeffrey Sachs, who, as director of the Millennium Project, is pushing the goals toward action, says, "I basically fell off my chair when I read it."

Who was this upstart? An Indian named Bunker Roy, 60, whose Tilonia-based group, the Barefoot College, has spent 30 years empowering India's rural poor to innovate their way out of poverty. Given that most of his constituents are among the population the Millennium Development Goals are targeting--the 1 billion people in the world who live on less than \$1 a day--you'd think that he and Sachs would be on the same page. They're not.

Roy's track record makes it hard to dismiss his motives as pure politics. In 1967, he abandoned a privileged upbringing outside Calcutta to spend five years digging wells in rural Rajasthan. That experience brought an epiphany: Leverage the tremendous knowledge and skills of the poor, and they'll be able to work toward their own development.

Barefoot College students, "washouts, copouts, and dropouts," as Roy fondly calls them, learn skills ranging from midwifery to computer programming, solar engineering to rainwater harvesting. There is no required curriculum, no deadline for graduation, no degree awarded. The school, which includes stipends for all students, is supported by the income generated by offering such services to villages all over India. "The point," says Roy, "is to demystify technology, to allow people the space to acquire a skill on their own time, and to build self-confidence so that they can replicate what they've learned at home."

That catalytic role has sparked the Barefoot College's expansion to 20 independent sites across India. The network, with nearly 1,000 Barefoot experts in 1,000 villages, reaches 500,000 people with basic services such as drinking water, health care, and education. "On the people's-empowerment front, Bunker's model is unbeatable," says Brenda McSweeney, who, as the top official for the UN Development Program in India from 1998 to 2003, worked with Roy and the Barefoot College. "There was an enormous sense of dignity among the people."

Roy hopes to seed baby Barefoots all over the world, something he's starting with a \$615,000 grant from the Skoll Foundation. It's a scalable, community-based model of development managed from the bottom up by the poor themselves--a decentralized alternative to the Millennium Villages launched in Kenya and Ethiopia by Sachs's Earth Institute at Columbia University. The big difference is, it costs at least \$250,000 to set up each Millennium Village. "Do you know how much I could get done with that kind of money?" Roy says. Last year, with just \$100,000, he brought 10 Afghans to India to train at the Barefoot College for six months and bought 120 solar units to power five villages.

In the face of mass poverty, of course, strategies such as Roy's can take decades and help just a relative few. "Not taking advantage of the West's technology and trade doesn't make sense," says David Evans, an associate economist at the Rand Corp. On the other hand, some Barefoot College programs already have made inroads in places such as Afghanistan and the northern Himalayas, where Western development efforts have trouble penetrating. Until the Millennium Project demonstrates proof of concept, Roy may have the best thing going.



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