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“Bite-Sized” Philanthropy

- ▶ New technologies and new strategies reach a new breed of philanthropists.

By Radha Muthiah, Vice President of Strategic Partnerships and Alliances, CARE, and Chris Shea, Senior Vice President, External Relations, General Mills and President, General Mills Community Action and Foundation



THERE IS A NEW CATEGORY OF GIVING these days that we like to call “bite-sized” philanthropy. And it is creating new ways for everyone to contribute in small but meaningful ways to projects that fight the root causes of global poverty. This “low cost, high volume” approach was seen as a breakthrough strategy for the Obama campaign

and has been rapidly gaining traction in the philanthropy space, thanks to the power of social networking, mobile giving and virtual currency such as Twitter *twollars*. Today’s “philanthropists” are a totally different group, not at all resembling our traditional view of the old-time way of giving money. This trend is being driven by the under-30s, an age group historically characterized more by energetic consumerism than social activism.

Historically, the intersection of philanthropy and development has been owned by a few key stakeholders contributing large sums of money—invariably a combination of bilateral or multilateral organizations such as USAID or the World Bank, large corporations seeking to demonstrate their commitment to global citizenship or exceedingly wealthy individuals wishing to do something for the world’s poor.

But in the last 5-7 years a new philanthropic movement has emerged that allows individuals of any income level to support social and economic development around the world through small donations. Organizations such as Kiva, Global Giving and Samasource, among others, have pioneered new ways for people of all walks of life to engage in global development.

But do small donations here and there really make a difference? The answer is a resounding YES. In the five years since Kiva launched, more than \$126 million has been donated in the form of micro-loans. Average loan: \$34. GlobalGiving’s marketplace of community-based development projects has generated \$26 million in donations since 2002.

There is no one giant step that does it. It’s a lot of little steps.

—Peter Cohen

Minimum contribution: \$10. Samasource, the online cash-for-work program, has helped disadvantaged people in Asia and Africa increase incomes by as much as 200 percent in only a few months. And one need look no further than the recent Haiti relief fundraising efforts to see how lots of small donations can add up to significant sums. In just 48 hours, the Red Cross was able to raise \$5 million through a text message program. Maximum donation: \$10.

Arguably, this grassroots-driven generosity is the result of both the growing influence of the millennial generation and the ease of social mobilization through technology. Pew released a study earlier this year on the millennial generation. Characterized as *confident, connected and open to change*, the millennials (18-29 year-olds) are more socially liberal and more apt to support companies and organizations based on social and/or political values. According to a Cone Inc. report, 61 percent of this age group feel personally responsible for making a difference in the world.

Technology—particularly social networks—has catalyzed an approach to philanthropy that moves faster, drives creativity and is less hierarchical. Social technologies such as Facebook, Twitter and mobile phones make it easier to build social capital around new ideas ▶



Naomi Chibwe, 39, is the Mzati (m-ZAH-tee) for the village Kaisi. Visitors to Join My Village can join Naomi’s village, or select from nine others, and track their progress.

Join My Village: A Bold New Model for Social Impact

With a vision to inspire women in the U.S. to come together in solidarity to empower women in Africa to achieve sustainable social and economic independence, CARE and General Mills launched the program Join My Village (www.joinmyvillage.com) in September 2009. Based on the belief in the power of “bite-sized” philanthropy, Join My Village was launched specifically to educate, engage and demonstrate that small actions could make a big change.

Join My Village channels the power of online communities in the U.S. to help real communities in Malawi. Through the use of multimedia storytelling, visitors can immediately get a sense of daily life in Malawi, where nearly half the population lives below the poverty line and the average life expectancy is 44 years of age. Three simple acts online—joining a village team, answering educational quiz questions about Malawi and extending an invitation to a friend—can unlock \$1 each, up to of \$250,000 from the General Mills donation fund. Participants also have the opportunity to make personal donations to *Join My Village*. These donations are matched dollar-for-dollar by General Mills, up to an additional \$50,000. Regular updates keep *Join My Village* members engaged in fundraising progress, as well as successes and impact in the Malawi villages the effort supports.

In just the first six months the program has had a demonstrable impact in providing project funding to CARE’s work in Malawi, while also engaging participants in a new way with both General Mills and CARE. The more than \$237,000 raised has already proved enough to fund 113 scholarships for girls, support 55 new village savings and loan groups and begin construction on houses for female teachers.

Although the current mission is to create and fund economic and educational opportunities for girls and women in approximately 75 Malawian villages, CARE and General Mills believe there is great potential to extend the *Join My Village* model beyond Malawi to other countries and continents.

Notes Chris Shea, Senior Vice President at General Mills, “We know from our legacy of box-top programs that small contributions can make a big difference. Our work with CARE and the *Join My Village* program gives General Mills an opportunity to extend this legacy of bite-sized philanthropy to engage even more people in creating a better world.”

and causes. One woman last year raised \$24,000 in one day for the NGO charity: water by asking her Twitter followers to donate two dollars each. The total was enough to fund the drilling of permanent wells for five African villages.

In addition to believing in their own responsibility to make the world a better place, 78 percent of millennials believe companies have a responsibility to join them in the effort. Corporations are responding accordingly. In 2006, companies gave an estimated \$1.3 billion through cause marketing partnerships with non-profits. This figure does not include the \$4.2 billion in contributions by corporate foundations that same year.


So what does this mean for companies and NGOs seeking to maximize the opportunity presented by the “bite-sized philanthropy” trend? The obvious news, of course, is that the Web creates significant opportunities to connect and engage a broader audience. This same technology provides the opportunity for individuals to create a sense of collective identity based on diverse perspectives

and around issues most meaningful to them. These grassroots experiences foster a positive visceral feeling and are a powerful force for helping the world.

The challenge is that the competition for hearts and minds is intense—according to the National Center for Charitable Statistics the number of operating public charities almost doubled between 1989 and 2004—which requires a different model than the one needed to service a smaller circle of big funders. It shifts the way we tell our stories about impact and think about donor stewardship. Big funders have traditionally wanted to know about technical expertise, building capacity and scale. In contrast, the “bite size” philanthropist wants to know about the people, the local context and how their donation is helping to change real lives. It also means we need to keep our message fresh, particularly for the new generation of e-philanthropists who tend to be more motivated by causes than missions. This group has demonstrated a willingness to enthusiastically engage in cam-

paings, but interest can quickly wane once a campaign ends.

All of this requires a different employee skill set than “the old days.” NGOs must take cues from the private sector and think more about creative brand management, campaign-oriented communications and audience segmentation. Joint campaigns with corporate partners need to reflect simple messages, demonstrate relevance and be original. NGOs need to know as much as possible about their various donors in order to understand what is required to maximize the opportunity to keep those donors engaged for the long-term.

In many ways the grass-roots nature of bite-sized philanthropy complements the growing emphasis on participatory development strategies. More people engaging on both sides of the equation creates tremendous opportunity for uncovering new ideas that foster social and economic opportunity for the world's poor. As we know, there is no silver bullet in the fight against global poverty. But it is clear that lots of little steps *can* make a big difference. 



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