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Barefoot College

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DEMYSTIFYING PROFESSIONALISM: THE BAREFOOT APPROACH

Mr. Bunker Roy
Founder, Barefoot College

Empowering the rural poor means developing their capacity. It means developing their skills so they become competent decision-makers with the confidence to act on their choices. Thus far, conventional approaches to such empowerment have failed. The approach that big donors and Western-conditioned experts have taken to reach the poor—forget about allowing the poor to develop themselves—has been patronizing, top-down, insensitive, and expensive. It excludes the marginalized, the exploited, and the very poor and keeps them from making decisions on their own. Thus it disempowers them, leaving them dependent and hopelessly ill prepared to improve their lives. Moreover, these "patrons," however well intentioned, have refused to learn from their mistakes. They are stuck in a rut that wastes money on a process that simply has not worked.

Enough research has been done. There is strong evidence to show the poor are becoming poorer around the world because we have been tackling rural problems by thrusting urban solutions on the poor. That is not what they need. On the basis of overpowering documentation what is the need of the hour is implementation. Fundamental change only comes out of conflict of ideas, approaches and methods. There are indeed many ways of empowering the poor. The "barefoot approach" is one such way.

It starts with giving the poor the right to decide for themselves how they want to improve their quality of life. They must have the right to choose whether they want the urban experts to come into their villages with "modern" ideas. They must have access to information and knowledge and the right to decide whether they would like to be independent of advice and skills from outside when they already have such incredible technical, human, and even financial resources within their own communities. They can even decide whether some knowledge would be useful if they could adapt it to serve their needs. What they need is the opportunity and space to develop themselves.

When provided with that mental and physical space, the poor can achieve wonders without any outside professional interference or advice. The trouble is that, even though established approaches have failed to achieve sustainable improvements, people are reluctant to turn the top-down process on its head and start from the bottom up. Few operational models provide a contrast that demonstrates the alternatives. But outside the usual box are other more cost effective approaches that draw more on the grassroots. There are ways to build on local knowledge and skills. And these approaches can be replicated on a large scale.

ORIGINS OF THE BAREFOOT IDEA

In 1971, I went to live and work in the rural village of Tilonia in Rajasthan, India, after receiving the most elitist, expensive, snobbish private education that any Indian could possibly receive. When I arrived, I remember being shaken by the questions the elders asked me:

Are you running from the police? Did you fail in your examinations? You did not manage to get a government job? Is there something wrong with you? Why are you here? Why have you come from the city to this village? There is no one here but the very old, the women, and the very young. The youth have left.

The youth had left to look for jobs—any job that would take them away from the village—because the predominant value system denigrated rural life, skills, and traditions and offered little hope of improved incomes or

quality of life. They had certificates in their hands from uninspiring mediocre technical institutes and colleges located in small towns producing "graduates" by the thousands with high expectations. These youths thought they were going to get well-paid, secure jobs in the cities. Instead, they swelled the ranks of the educated unemployables living on the pavements and in the slums in the metropolitan cities of India.

Why unemployable? Because their paper degrees had no value. The certified doctors, teachers, and engineers produced by the thousands every year are paper experts without any practical experience. They are caught up in a system that is not accountable to the people it is supposed to serve and produces insufficient jobs to absorb the number of job seekers. Civil engineers build roads that do not last; water engineers build tanks that collapse or crack and cannot be used; doctors focus on curative approaches and know little or nothing about preventive health. So in the absence of jobs but still hoping for any job, they live an inhuman existence in appalling urban slums. The humiliation and scorn they would face on returning to the village prevent them from going back. Anyone going back to the village is considered a failure and the shame is shared by the whole family.

When the youth fled, they took with them the dying hopes of their parents—weavers, blacksmiths, potters, builders, carpenters, farmers—to pass on the traditional skills to the next generation. They left behind not only their families but also the knowledge their elders had collected over the generations to adapt to local conditions. This was knowledge that no formal educational system valued, but it was critical for developing a community with dignity and self-respect. The formal educational system had made them look down on their own roots.

For me, living and working in the villages for five years as an unskilled laborer digging and blasting wells and meeting with very ordinary poor people was an extraordinary experience. Between 1967 and 1971, I went through an "unlearning" process that provided the seeds for the humble beginning of the Barefoot College.

Over the last 40 years, what we have "unlearned" is our gross underestimation of people's infinite capacity to identify and solve their own problems with their own creativity and skills, and to depend on each other in tackling problems.

What I learned is that empowerment of the marginalized rural poor is about developing that capacity to solve problems, to make choices, and to have the confidence to act on them.

On a different front, the college understood the specific real needs of the rural poor. These people needed to assert their identity and demonstrate that their knowledge and skills were not outdated, second-rate, or irrelevant. They needed a college dedicated to their specific and special circumstances, and one located in a remote rural area. They needed a place where they could feel a sense of ownership, where their self-respect and self-esteem could be developed gradually over the years.

The Barefoot College acts as a counterpoint both to the incredible ignorance and arrogance the formal system displays and to its belief that it makes an indispensable contribution to tackling poverty; in reality that approach is counterproductive, even dangerous.

WHAT IS BAREFOOT COLLEGE?

As an organization, Barefoot College is the only college in India that follows the lifestyle and work style of Gandhi. It is the only college built by the poor, for the poor, and for the last 40 years, managed, controlled, and owned by the poor. Underlying the Barefoot approach is a firm belief in the knowledge, creativity, practical wisdom, and survival skills of the marginalized poor—possibly the only answer to making communities self reliant and sustainable. For an unemployed and employable semi-literate rural youth to be providing vital services in a village, replacing an urban, paper-qualified doctor, teacher, or water engineer is a totally revolutionary idea. And yet, this is what happens at the Barefoot College every day.

It is the only college where paper degrees, diplomas, and doctorates are a disqualification because people are judged not according to their degree of literacy or academic distinction, but by their attributes: honesty, integrity, compassion, practical skills, creativity, adaptability, willingness to listen and learn, and ability to work with all sorts of people without discriminating.

The term "barefoot" is both symbolic and literal. Those who work, teach, learn, and "unlearn" and provide a technical skill without a paper degree issued by the Barefoot College go barefoot and remain so after they return to their own villages. Their goal is not to change their lifestyle but to gain the basic skills they need to provide to their own communities a vital service, one that urban professionals are currently trying to provide, most often unsuccessfully. Meanwhile they are maintaining a healthy and sustainable lifestyle for themselves and their community.

The Barefoot College is a radical departure from the traditional concept of a "college" because it encourages a hands-on learning-by-doing process of gaining practical knowledge and skills rather than written tests and paper-based qualifications. It promotes and strengthens the kind of education one absorbs from family, community, and personal experience. It deliberately confers no degrees, with a view to reversing migration. If one can improve the quality of life in one's community by providing a vital service, why would anyone in their right mind want to live an unspeakably miserable existence in the urban slums? In any case, because barefoot professionals do not have paper certificates, no one in the urban areas, sadly, will seriously value their skills.

The ideology of the Barefoot College four key components: Alternative Education, Valuing Traditional Knowledge and Skills, Learning for Self-Reliance, and Dissemination.

Alternative Education

First, the Barefoot College demystifies education, taking Mark Twain to heart: "Never let School interfere with your Education." Mahatma Gandhi believed that giving more importance, value, and relevance to practical skills and applying traditional knowledge to solving day-to-day problems was essential for the development of rural India. Gandhi's thoughts live on in the Barefoot College. Living conditions for everyone are simple and down to earth (literally!). Everyone sits, eats, and works on the floor. No one can receive a salary of over US $150 a month.

Valuing Traditional Knowledge and Skills

Second, the Barefoot College gives priority to the ideas, thoughts, and wishes of the rural poor. The college respects and emphasizes the importance of traditional knowledge, skills, and practical wisdom. It values keeping the oral tradition alive from father to son. This type of education is deeply rooted in long experience facing the challenges of living in particular circumstances and can never be replaced. The focus of the college is to make the young men, women, and children living in the village aware of this precious resource so that eventually they will stay in their villages and not migrate to the cities to end up living in a slum.

This is a major reason why the college places no importance on urban experts with paper degrees and qualifications who want to participate in it. In fact, people may be disqualified if they have too many paper qualifications. Sadly, 40 years of exposure and experience in rural India has taught us that most people with high-level paper qualifications are unfit (and misfits) when it comes to living and working in remote rural areas. They do not have the patience, humility, listening skills, open minds, tolerance, or capacity to show respect for traditional knowledge and skills.

Learning for Self-Reliance

Third, Barefoot College enhances the self-confidence and competence of the poorest of the poor by providing them access to learning that enhances their ability to serve their own community, thus making them more

confidently self-reliant. Over the last 40 years, thousands of unemployed and unemployable rural poor have been selected and trained as barefoot educators and technologists.

The criteria for selection are simple. We select only those village youth—both men and women—who are illiterate, semiliterate, or barely literate and who have no hope of getting the lowest government job. They have been trained as "barefoot" educators, doctors, teachers, engineers, architects, designers, communicators, hand pump mechanics, and accountants. They have demonstrated that "experts" from the urban areas with paper qualifications are not really required to make villages self-sufficient and sustainable because these trained "barefoot" experts can do the work themselves.

In keeping with the Barefoot philosophy, each operates independently, defining its own curriculum but keeping a few non-negotiable tenets at the core of their operations:

Equality. All people in the college are equal regardless of gender, caste, ethnicity, age, and schooling. In practical terms, this means the college has no hierarchy. The founder and director of a college have the same say and status as the new barefoot accountant who has just joined it and the physically challenged barefoot operator who answers the phone.

Austerity. Everyone in the college receives a living wage, not a market wage. The maximum wage anyone can earn is US $150/month; the minimum is about half that at 73 Indian rupees per day. Living conditions focus on basic needs and are designed to minimize waste.

Collective Decision-Making. Decisions are made collectively, not by individuals in isolation. For example, the salary each person receives is decided on by everyone in the organization; the process is based on a points system in which each person evaluates himself and everyone else according to several criteria.

Barefoot College is also the only fully solar-electrified college based in a village in India. Starting in 1989, barefoot solar engineers installed a total of 40 kilowatts of solar panels and 5 battery banks, each containing 136 deep-cycle batteries. The solar components (inverters, charge controllers, battery boxes, stands) were all fabricated in the college itself.

EMPOWERING RURAL WOMEN

Only in the late 1980s did Barefoot College begin to recognize the potential of illiterate and semi-literate women to succeed in these non-traditional areas. As we have implemented this approach over the last 25 years, the women we have worked with have shown an awesome capacity and confidence to provide a service to their communities and to destroy stereotyped images and roles in the process.

Today many women in non-traditional roles are serving their own communities. "Barefoot" women are working as night school teachers, hand-pump mechanics, solar engineers, water engineers, architects, masons, and fabricators of solar cookers. Illiteracy has never been considered a barrier to women developing themselves as barefoot professionals.

Illiterate women are handling computers and training unemployed youth in feeding technical, health, and literacy data to our organization.

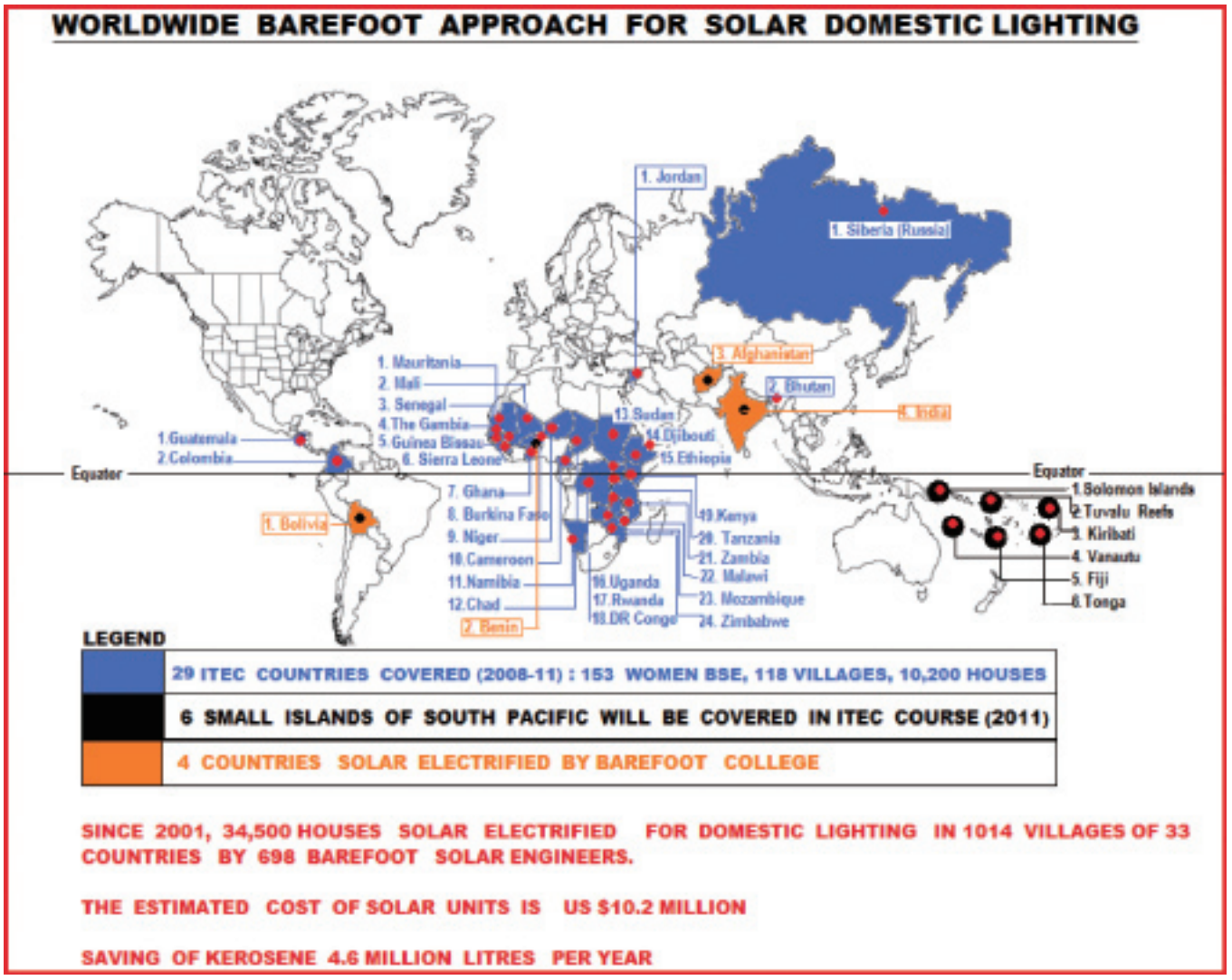
Some programs cover areas such as water and education, where women have traditionally been very active, but their role in spreading solar technology is totally new for them, although it does build on their traditional responsibility to maintain the supplies of kerosene for lighting and fuel for cooking.

What is remarkable is that for the first time sophisticated solar technology has been demystified, and simple village women have demonstrated how effectively they can manage and control it to improve their quality of life. They now have the opportunity to develop their competence and confidence to handle technology, providing

services to their own community that give them a new level of acceptance and the respect they deserve.

What is innovative is involving the whole community in selecting semi-literate women as engineers to provide a vital and non-traditional technical service in an area not generally associated with rural women. It also requires them to develop systematic leadership skills, persuading the community to pay a monthly contribution for the repair and maintenance of the solar systems they have installed in each house in their own village. Where this system was first adopted, the household contributions have been coming in regularly for the last four years.

EMPOWERED BAREFOOT WOMEN AROUND THE WORLD



The demystified and decentralized barefoot approach of solar electrifying villages primarily in the South would not have been possible without PARTNERSHIPS.

Under a unique scheme of the Government of India providing financial support called India Technical Economic Cooperation (ITEC) over 200 illiterate grandmothers from nearly 30 LDCs have been trained at the Barefoot College. Nearly US $ 700,000 have been spent on air fares and training costs between 2009-2011.

The hardware (solar equipment) has been provided under a Global Agreement with the GEF Small Grants

Programme of the UNDP covering Uganda, Niger, Chad, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mozambique, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Kenya.

PROFILES:

Fatuma Abubker Ibrahim, one of the Barefoot Solar Engineers of Ethiopia, lives in the remote village of Beyahile, in Afar state. Fatuma is 20 years old, single, attended primary school, and lives with her parents. She and her family tend to their three cows, 30 goats, and three camels on two hectares of land. Since July 2006, Fatuma has also been looking after 90 fixed solar units, 90 solar lanterns, and one rural electronic workshop in Beyahile and nearby villages.

Awatif Abduraheman lives in the remote village of Benishangul in Ethiopia. Semiliterate, she is 25, married, and has three sons. She and her family make their living farming their four hectares. Awatif also does domestic work, and since July 2006 has been installing, maintaining, and repairing 80 solar units in her village and others nearby.

Aminata Woulet is 40 and lives in Tinjambane village in Timbuktu in Mali. A widow since 1994, she has never been to school, but can read and write. She has other skills: dyeing cloth with indigo, making leather crafts, and looking after goats.

Haja Woulet is 32, a widow with one 10-year-old daughter. She is illiterate and lives with her parents, also in Tinjambane.

Together Aminata and Haja solar electrified their own village of 92 houses in 10 days; it was the first village in Mali where rural women installed solar electricity.

Aji Kamera lives in the village of Kafenkeng in The Gambia. She is over 30, married with four children, and a Muslim. She attended school up to class 7 but then dropped out. She owns a small plot, on which she keeps three goats, a cow and four chickens. She installed solar electric units in 40 houses in one week; they have been functioning for nearly a year now.

Nancy Kanu, a Muslim, lives in KontaLine in Sierra Leone. She is 40 years old, has six children, and is semi-literate. She owns one sheep and one goat. Single-handedly, she solar electrified her village of 35 houses and was the first women solar engineer in Sierra Leone.

That same kind of empowerment has now spread to women beyond India into other parts of Asia and Africa. For the past 11 years, the Barefoot College has been training semi-literate and illiterate rural women to assemble, install, repair, and maintain solar photovoltaic systems. Once selected by their village to undergo solar training for six months at the Barefoot College, the women come to Tilonia and acquire the competence and confidence to fabricate, install, repair, and maintain sophisticated solar units. They then return to their communities to install solar systems in each house in the village, thus establishing their credibility in the eyes of each family that pays a monthly contribution for them to repair and maintain the units.

Never in the history of Afghanistan has an illiterate woman left her house, her village, and her country for six months to train as a solar engineer in India, but that is exactly what 26-year-old Gul Zaman, from the village of Katasang in Daikundi province, did in 2005. She and her 30-year-old husband Mohammed Jan came to Tilonia for six months. They have a small plot of land to feed 10 people, and work as day laborers for over 200 days each year. Together the couple gently created history by solar electrifying their own village of some 50 houses, and the units have continued functioning since September 2005.

Electrifying houses provides additional income and a new level of confidence and leadership to the women who train in Tilonia as solar engineers and then serve as role models for young women in their villages. It also

opens up other income generating opportunities for all women, who can then use their evening hours to manufacture handicrafts and other goods for sale.

CHALLENGES AND LESSONS LEARNED

What is pioneering and innovative about the Barefoot approach is the emphasis and respect it gives to applying the knowledge, skills, and practical wisdom of the rural poor—which may be the only way to make communities self-reliant and sustainable.

With roots in the village community and a deep-rooted respect for the proper and wise use of water, air, earth, and the sun, Barefoot Educators have set an example of how NOT to waste or overexploit nature resources. They are a living testimony to Mahatma Gandhi's famous saying, "The world has enough for every man's need but not for one man's greed."

The approach has had a considerable impact in changing the mindset of urban "experts" and influencing their attitudes toward the idea of having the poor identify and solve their own problems.

Development with dignity means development with less dependence on urban skills and more self-respect. The Barefoot approach has worked. The results are there for everyone to see and feel.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

PROMOTING A DIFFERENT VISION OF DEVELOPMENT

The first challenge has been to convince people that a different vision of development is possible. Throughout its brief lifetime, the college has worked hard to convince urban people that semi-literate men and women from any village in India—indeed, any remote village in the world—can competently provide professional services to their own communities. While the results of the college's work speak for themselves, this task continues to be a daunting one since it involves changing long-held stereotypes, mindsets, and attitudes towards the poor. Still, a great many people, including many who hold important positions, have learned about its activities and have traveled to Tilonia to witness its work first-hand. We make progress with each new person who comes to the campus, as they absorb the spirit of the approach and are inspired to help disseminate and expand it within their own spheres of influence.

DEALING WITH SUCCESS

The second challenge has been dealing with success. The college has demonstrated that semi-literate rural women can solar-electrify remote villages and look after solar units more competently than paper-qualified solar engineers. In so doing, it has turned established perceptions upside down, and debunked the basic assumption that formal education is required for development work. Unfortunately, in challenging established thinking on development, the college has generated hostility and jealousy, and has made many enemies.

Those most hostile to the Barefoot approach are people who have invested a great deal in acquiring an education through the official system and then applying that misguided "expertise." The very idea of semi-literate women being able to manage and control initiatives at the village level undermines those hard-earned credentials and credibility and even threatens the existence of their jobs. Indeed, one result of the Barefoot approach in India, where it is most widely replicated, has been the replacement of cost-intensive initiatives and jobs by low-cost and intensive initiatives, providing gainful employment within the villages.

LEARNING FROM FAILURE

The third major challenge has been to learn from successful failures. Taking risks, trying new ideas, failing and trying again is a process that is respected in the Barefoot College because we recognize that we should learn as much from failure as from success. But the formal education system has no room for failure. In that system, failure

is considered a matter for shame and regret. Barefoot College gives everyone involved the opportunity to make mistakes and learn from them. Any organization worth its salt has to go through crises. The crises can either break the organization into little splinters or eventually make it stronger. In the early 1980s, as decision-making power within the college gradually shifted from the urban professionals to the rural youth, many of the former left to join other organizations or opted back into the system. That was a crisis that led to uncertainty and insecurity. But the college learned two important lessons that have since guided and influenced future decisions.

1. Do not depend on urban professionals because they will not stay there all their lives. In a world dominated by materialism, they may be tempted to use the college as a stepping-stone to secure better-paying jobs. The answer has been to develop the capacity, confidence, and competence of the rural poor to provide their own services. After all, they have the knowledge and the skills that have stood the test of generations before the urban-trained doctor, teacher, and engineer turned up on the scene. Why not, as a policy, move in that direction? That is what we have done and it has been a key to our success.
2. You do your best work when you are insecure. When your back is against a wall and you have nowhere to run and no one to turn to, you have no choice but to face the consequences. When a crisis arises and could possibly lead to violence, urban professionals normally do not have the staying power. Because they have somewhere to run to, they are not prepared to see the crisis through.

In many ways, the Barefoot College is a microcosm of a more just and creative world. Special emphasis is placed on giving the physically and mentally impaired the same opportunities to work and belong to society as the physically and mentally able. People who need medication but cannot afford to pay the market price are charged 10 percent of that price by the health center; if they are really struggling they are given the medication free of charge. Waste paper from offices is recycled to make bags, pencil holders, origami, and teaching tools—which are in turn supplied to local night schools. Office equipment, fans, and lights are powered by solar panels on the roofs of office buildings; living quarters are similarly supplied with solar energy. Drinking water and sanitation needs are met by a combination of rooftop rainwater harvesting and local hand pumps; and the local environment is strengthened by a network of troughs that harvest rainwater and feed it into a large open well used to recharge the water table. Discarded intravenous drip bottles and tubes are disinfected and used to irrigate plants on the campus in this semi-desert area.

The Barefoot College has been putting into practice an idea first espoused by Mahatma Gandhi: that the resources required to develop poor communities lie within the bounds of those communities. Human, technical, and financial resources need not come from outside in order for a community to bring about fundamental change and improve its quality of life. Too often, community resources are neglected, looked down upon, and considered inferior just because they have not conformed to the formal requirements of the education system.

However, just as important, the college has demonstrated to the villagers themselves that any one of them, man or woman, with little or no educational qualifications, can learn to provide basic services to their own community. To be able to change the mindset of poor rural people who have been made to feel that they cannot do it themselves is an enormous contribution. Less developed countries would benefit immensely from adopting this Barefoot approach. It can eventually transform the outlook not only of development officials, but, most importantly, of the rural poor themselves, instilling in them a “can do” attitude to improving their own lives, and replacing the apathy and hopelessness they may feel after so many years of coming up against an irresponsive system that does not respect their abilities.

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, and then you win—*Mahatma Gandhi*

公益財団法人 旭硝子財団
〒102-0081 東京都千代田区四番町5-3 サイエンスプラザ2F
THE ASAHI GLASS FOUNDATION
2nd Floor, Science Plaza, 5-3, Yonbancho
Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo 102-0081, Japan
Phone 03-5275-0620 Fax 03-5275-0871
E-Mail post@af-info.or.jp
URL http://www.af-info.or.jp