The Computerworld Honors Program

Honoring those who use Information Technology to benefit society

Final Copy of Case Study

Year:
2013

Status:
Laureate

Organization Name:
Solar Sister

Organization URL:
www.solarsister.org

Project Name:
Solar Sister Program

Category:
Economic Development

Please provide an overview of the nominated project. Describe the problem it was intended to solve, the technology or approach used, how it was innovative and any technical or other challenges that had to be overcome for successful implementation and adoption. (In 300 words or less.)

Solar Sister is a social enterprise that seeks to eradicate energy poverty by empowering African women with economic opportunity. More than 1 billion people in the world have no access to electricity, More than 500 million of these people live in Africa. In Uganda, less than 9% of the entire population is covered by grid electricity. There is a huge energy poverty problem, and 70% of those affected by energy poverty are women and girls. They spend most of their time in smoky kitchens inhaling toxic fumes from kerosene lanterns, trying to fix a meal for their family or doing daily chores. Solar Sister is an innovative social enterprise that seeks to eradicate energy poverty. We use the breakthrough potential of solar technology to provide light, hope and opportunity to women

inrural Uganda, Rwanda and Southern Sudan. The technology is readily available but there is no way it can reach the hands of those who need it because of lack of a better distribution channel. We use our network of entrepreneurs to reach out to homes and families that need access to light by using a direct sales network. Solar Sister uses simple tools like mobile phones, Google docs implementation, and Salesforce to manage our inventory systems and frontline SMS to disseminate mass information to our women networks about new products on the market, discounts and when they should order for new products, etc. Our innovation runs around the fact that we use women who understand the challenge of energy poverty as ambassadors and salespeople to bring about change in their society. These women get jobs and are able to empower their families and thus gain economic opportunity.

When was this project implemented or last updated? (Please specify month and year.) Has it incorporated new technologies and/or other innovations since its initial deployment? (In 300 words or less.)

Solar Sister was incorporated in October 2010, and we started with a small pilot of 10 women in rural Uganda to test the need. In 2011, we started our full program and recruited about 100 entrepreneurs across Uganda selling solar lanterns to their communities. The response was enormous, and the need was apparent. At the start we did not have a lot technology in use, but we used a lot of Google docs for managing our data and inventory, tracking every single lantern out in the field. One big tool that has been essential for us in terms of communication has been mobile phones, with such a high mobile phone penetration in Africa and in Uganda – even families that earn less than a dollar a day will have 2 mobile phones in a family. We use that as a resource for communication to the entrepreneurs, and also help them use their phones to provide feedback to us on important information about the products. Today, we have about 300 entrepreneurs and are on course this year to bring the number to 600 entrepreneurs. We have added new technologies like implementing Salesforce, which is a great CRM and cloud computing solution that will help us track our inventory as well, and also manage our communication back and forth with entrepreneurs and with field staff.

Is implementation of the project complete? If no, please describe the project's phases and which phase the project is now in. (In 300 words or less.)

Solar Sister is an ongoing program. We seek to be in every sub-Saharan African country and extend a business opportunity to many women and girls in Africa. Our target is to reach more than 5,000 Solar Sister entrepreneurs in Africa across different countries. Right now we are mainly operational in Uganda with 300 entrepreneurs, with small dots in Rwanda and Southern Sudan. Our vision this

year is to scale the program in Uganda by hiring more Solar Sister entrepreneurs and doubling our count in Uganda to 600 women, and also expanding to Tanzania and Nigeria this year.

Please provide at least one example of how the technology project has benefited a specific individual or organization. Feel free to include personal quotes from individuals who have directly benefited from the work. (In 300 words or less.)

Over the course of the years we have seen the tremendous impact of our program to people's lives. Having access to clean light means a lot to a family in so many ways. With the ongoing climate change everywhere, solutions like Solar Sister not only help women start businesses but also contribute to a greener economy. The World Health Organisation in one of their reports stated that someone who spends an entire day in a small kitchen in Africa inhaling toxic fumes from burning kerosene and firewood is equivalent to a person who smokes two packets of cigarettes – a real danger to society. What Solar Sister has done in a community is help empower women with jobs. One specific example I will share is of one of our entrepreneurs, Teddy Namirembe, who before joining Solar Sister had a tailoring business and paid rent at a house far away from home to do her tailoring business, because she had no light at home. This was not only expensive but she constantly worried about leaving her children at home with a candle to use in the house. She became a Solar Sister, and she brought light at home. Now she can do her business at home, meaning she is saving money that she spent on rent, and she has clean light at home that is safe for her family. Teddy's story means that her children now can have a decent education because she is making some money with Solar Sister and her children can also study at night because they have solar lanterns. Before, they only used a kerosene lamp, which was harmful to their lives in many ways than one. That is the kind of impact Solar Sister has.

Would this project be considered an innovation, a best practice or other notable advancement that could be adopted by or tailored for other organizations and uses? If yes, please describe that here. (In 300 words or less.)

Solar Sister is an innovation. We use networks of women to do direct sales in society – a model similar to that of Avon – which is a cosmetics company that has existed for more than 100 years selling beauty products through a direct sales channel using women. There is a huge gap in distribution of technologies in Uganda. The technology is widely available but really useless if it cannot reach the hands of those that need it, so we are solving a need of using the best innovative way to reach out to families that need the solar technology. This kind of innovation can be adopted in other organisations by using what they have to

reach out to communities.

If there are any other details that the judges should know about this project, please note them here. (In 300 words or less.)

Solar Sister was honored to have been selected as one of the Momentum for Change Lighthouse Activities for 2012 by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). Check out this video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=Nymr2Nbxow0