Enabling prosperity

**ZENIA TATA** is executive director of International Development Enterprises (IDE), a 25-year-old nonprofit Denver-based organization which works globally to alleviate rural poverty in the world’s least developed nations. Originally from Bombay, Tata has worked in nonprofit organizations in the US and India for 15 years.

No water, no crops, no food, no income; no water, no crops no food, no income. For the last 25 years, International Development Enterprises (IDE) has been working to change the vicious cycle of poverty in rural areas across Asia, Africa and recently in Central America.

“Poverty is extraordinarily complex and there are many reasons why countries are poor and many reasons why they remain poor,” said Zenia Tata in her presentation to the CIBER conference. “In addition to obvious economic reasons, there might be historic, religious, health and sanitation reasons to name a few.”

Rather than trying to treat poverty in its many configurations, IDE has chosen to offer just one solution for maximum effectiveness: income generation activities for subsistence farmers “so they can invest in their own escape from poverty.”

Tata quoted figures putting the number of people living in poverty worldwide at 1.2 billion. Of this number “more than 800 thousand are subsistence farmers, people who rely on natural resources to earn an income. Typically, those natural resources are a very, very tiny piece of land, less than an acre in Asia, about two acres in Africa.”

What does poverty look like in the geographical areas IDE targets?

“Most of the people we work with earn about $130 a year or 26-28 cents a day. In most of rural India and China people earn less than $100 a year,” said Tata. The income is seasonal and can’t be counted on to be there week after week.

Talk to hungry people about income generating measures and they’re likely not to hear you, said Tata. But over the course of two decades IDE has succeeded in reaching 17 million individuals -- about 3.5 million families -- due to a methodology based on access to water and connection to markets.

“We help farmers recognize what their assets are and how to capitalize on those assets,” said Tata. “Land is one asset. The second is a low labor cost because it’s all in the family.” The missing ingredient is water -- getting it from the ground, lakes and rivers to the crops. IDE has solved that problem.

**Access to water**

“We have taken known technology for irrigation – the treadle pump – and re-engineered it for what we call extreme affordability for poor farmers,” said Tata.

IDE’s treadle pump is activated by foot power; someone stands on the two treadles and works them up and down. Think Stairmaster. The cost of the pump varies by country. “In India the cost is $12, in Myanmar $17, in Africa $30. “With a small investment, a subsistence farm family is on its way to earning a living.”

For families that can’t invest in a treadle pump, a bucket drip system is even more affordable. Briefly, a bucket sits on top of the land with tubes that are inserted deep into the ground and draw water up into a plastic bag. A spigot on the bag allows the farmer to control the flow of water to the base of each plant. “With as little as $3-$5 you can start a drip kit in your backyard, grow some plants to feed your family and also some extras to sell in the marketplace.”

**Connection to markets**

“Our vision is that every farmer can have a role in either the local or global marketplace,” said Tata. As a local example, she explained how IDE representatives helped connect high-altitude villages in Nepal to markets customarily and laboriously accessed by foot.

“We set up an aggregation center and organized a van from the center down to the marketplace. Farmers paid for the van because it’s the cost of doing business and they factored the cost into their selling price. Suddenly farmers
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from 21 villages got connected to a market.”

Market research is part of IDE’s methodology. “Although we talk about water, markets are our entry point into the areas that we work. We research what the market will bear and assess the demand so we can advise farmers what to grow,” said Tata.

“We view the poor as customers; we market to them, we train them and they’re no different from you and me.

The results of the IDE program are cumulative. “At the end of the first growing season subsistence farmers can realize an increase from base income of about $150. By the end of the second season they can realize an increase of around $300. Then it’s just onward and upward from there.”

Tata reports that after a year of working with IDE, farmers who previously went hungry are able to set money aside for their children’s education and put 2 percent of their income into savings. •