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Mitra Ardron, Natural Innovation

Solstice 2010/2011 newsletter
- from Freiburg Germany

Hi, and welcome to my first newsletter, both the first newsletter I've sent out, and the first time using this newsletter software, so please let me know if there are any problems, and of course if you don't want to receive any more of these see the Unsubscribe link at the bottom.
I've been on a quest - that started with asking once again, how I could be most effective in making a difference. So here is the story so far ...
I started the journey of creating the Natural Innovation Foundation in November 2009 during a trip to check out some technologies for UES and for a new investment fund I was advising. During the trip, a realisation crystalized that the technologies with the highest potential to impact our planet, and in particularly the billions without adequate supplies of food, clean water & energy were not going to be funded by classical philanthropy because it was averse to risk, especially technical risk, nor would it be funded by venture capital because there was unlikely to be sufficient return because of the poverty of the customers, and in many cases the difficulty of protecting the Intellectual Property.

So I transformed my consultancy, Natural Innovations, to focus on supporting clean technology innovations with high potential impact.
For me personally, its been a challenging 15 months, during which I've only been home (Byron Bay, Australia) for about 8 weeks. This will be the first time in over ten years I'm not home for the solstice / xmas / new-years holiday. But I've enjoyed living in many places, ten countries in all, including reasonably long stints in India, Indonesia, Germany, Portugal, and the US. I really want to thank the people who have opened their homes and hearts to me, especially Brewster & Mary in San Francisco; Rachel, Rob & Johnny in Bali; Nikhil, Tanmayo, Freeman & Mario in India; Wendelin & Khabira in Freiburg & everyone else who lent me a bed along the way.

Sunvention

I first came across Sunvention when I was looking for some technology for UES to improve energy efficiency in their greenhouses. We traveled to Tamera in Portugal and met Jürgen Kleinwächter there. Apart from it being appropriate to UES, it was clear to me that this was the most impressive set of under-exploited technologies in terms of its potential impact in developing countries. Since June I've been helping Jürgen to go through a serious restructure caused by the internal problems of its majority investor. We've been exploring the opportunities both for commercial funding, and also for reorganizing Sunvention as a Social Venture, focused on how to maximise its impact, rather than generate a return. I came out to Germany after SoCap and am still here. At this time, we are still looking for investors or donors that might be interested either in the core venture, or in specific projects.

As just one example - they have developed and tested the SunPulse Water, a solar thermal water pump. It will be affordable to millions of farmers who couldn't afford the running cost of comparable diesel pumps, or the capital cost of photovoltaics. It is expected to cost about 1/3 of the price of either, per liter pumped, overall. Because of delays raising finance, I've just postponed a trip to India to talk to potential distributors, one of which has indicated a likely demand for 50,000 (over €50m) in their state alone. Sunvention is currently looking for ten sites to purchase and test these pumps in a variety of environments. {More} (http://naturalinnovation.org/index.php/innovators/33-sunpulsewater)

Many organisations have done interesting work improving the combustion efficiency of stoves to reduce the amount of wood required and the health impact of smoke. Sunvention has an interesting alternative approach, using a simple oxygen generator (http://naturalinnovation.org/index.php/innovators/40-oxygen) to allow the burning of even really low quality biomass such as crop residues, grass clippings etc. I'm hoping to help Sunvention raise some finance to complete some prototypes, and to open-source this project.

I'm interested in talking to anyone interested from either a philanthropic or investment perspective.

Social Ventures

During my time in San Francisco I joined the "Hub" (http://bayarea.the-hub.net/) and really grew to appreciate the Social Entreprenurs who used its shared working space. It deepened my commitment to the space between charities and businesses.
Charity doesn’t scale to meet the needs of billions, and corporate greed cannot be satisfied by the poorest of the poor, which is why basic human needs remain unmet despite the existence of (technical) solutions, and scaling solutions (http://www.mitra.biz/joomla/index.php/blog/3055-scaling) is one of my passions.

Between these two models lies the emerging area of Social Ventures, where an entity operates like a business, but is driven by a mission rather than only by profit. Social Ventures range from Charities with a business activity, through to Corporations acting responsibility.

It is somewhere in the middle where I believe my ideal model lies, organisations where the mission is crucial to the organisation, and not just an add-on, and where finance is only required to get it going e.g. to for example to create and bring to market a technology, but where the solutions can be provided on a commercially viable basis, because the cost has been dropped to a point where the poor can afford it.

Since I'm focused on the early stages of technology, the question is where the funding will come from, and what the equivalent of venture capital is, in the area of impact investing. I led a session at the excellent SoCap conference on this topic, where I was also interviewed for the Uptake (http://naturalinnovation.org/index.php/about-us/news/38-socap10).

OneFridge Project - affordable cooling in developing countries

I recently saw an exciting device that when you heat it up - for example in a fire, or with solar, it stores not heat, but cold, which can be released any time.
The clever people behind it would like to make it as widely available as possible. I'll be working with them to raise some funds to apply the concept to solving serious issues with refrigeration, especially for medical purposes, in developing countries. I'll write more on my website as it develops, or get in touch if you might be interested in funding it.

Indonesia

In August I spent a month in Indonesia, principally Bali, getting to know the culture and the wonderful people. I had the pleasure of staying at Rachel, Rob & Johnny's home overlooking a valley just outside Ubud. Its hard to imagine a more perfect place for me, with the peace of nature, other social entrepreneurs and close to town. Though I'd come to Bali with a main interest being the highly promising Vortex hydro-power (http://naturalinnovation.org/index.php/innovators/17-vortex) technology it wasn't really happening, so I spent my time working out of "Kafe" & getting to know the people pushing the envelope of sustainable innovation.
There are very few people really supporting innovation in developing countries, in Indonesia a notable exception are Ramp and Inotek (http://naturalinnovation.org/index.php/about-us/partners/12-innovationsupport/39-indonesia-ramp-inotek) whose course and mentorship program for young innovators I got to visit

Urban Ecological Systems

Sometimes things take a long time, and a highlight this year was seeing Urban Ecological Systems get the investment, from someone I introduced to them in the middle of 2009, for their first commercial system to be built near Sydney. Its a multi-million dollar project, and is a huge vote of confidence in their technology. They are still looking for investment into the core company, let me know if you are interested.

Tamera and Auroville

As I lived most of my life in intentional communities, I always enjoy it when I have a good reason to visit one. This year I've had the pleasure of staying at two eco-villages, both of which have a substantial amount of renewable energy activity.
The first was Auroville in India, a planned community of about 2000 people (though they've always planned for many more) with a blend of Tamil's and westerners. I visited people working on building & distributing clean technologies to rural India, including solar; wind; stoves; earth-building and in saw new developments in LED street lighting and ruggedised electric scooters. I particularly appreciated at Auroville the importance of spirituality or connection to the divine without there being any one dogma. {More (http://www.mitra.biz/joomla/index.php/blog/3062-auroville)}
I also spent a few weeks with the Solar Village team at Tamera, a very different community of about 200 people in Portugal, it is much more intense and intellectual, and is researching all kinds of technology for food and energy, with a focus on autonomous communities and developing countries. They will be looking for interns in the spring to work on technologies for

communities or developing countries. {More (http://www.tamera.org/index.php?id=225)}
I look forward to returning to both of these communities.

Keep in Touch

If you want to keep in touch with what I'm doing, I write an occasional informal blog (http://www.mitra.biz/joomla/index.php/blog/3055-scaling) on my activities and clean technology in general, and also am expanding the Natural Innovation website (http://www.naturalinnovation) focused on technology for developing countries. You can also find me on facebook (http://www.facebook.com/Mitraardron).
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