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EDITORIAL

Lighting the Way

Sometimes thinking small can get things done. To bring artificial light to an isolated village or refugee camp could require building an enormous hydroelectric dam, followed by laying hundreds of miles of cable. Or it could take the donation of a $10 solar flashlight.

As Will Connors and Ralph Blumenthal reported in The Times recently, the entrepreneur Mark Bent, through his company SunNight Solar, has developed and manufactured a solar-powered flashlight that gives up to seven hours of light, before recharging, and can last close to three years between battery replacements. The flashlight retails for around $20 in American stores, but corporate donors have gotten them for aid groups at half the price, a deep discount but still a profit for Mr. Bent.

One might be tempted to ask what's the big deal about a flashlight? In America they often sit under car seats for years without being used, or are the object of fruitless searching when the power goes out.

Artificial light is among the easiest things for people in the developed world to take for granted. But to those living off the grid — a number approaching 2 billion people worldwide — access to a safe, affordable source of light can be life-changing. The productive day stretches past sunset to allow students to do schoolwork or small vendors to extend their selling hours. Light means added safety, whether at home or traveling alone, particularly for women. As a replacement for kerosene and wood fires, the flashlights are a boon for the environment.

As technologies advance, people in wealthy countries carry ever smaller computers in knapsacks and phones in their pockets. But the same advances bring simple, rugged technologies like the solar torch within reach of the poor. The brightest minds shouldn't be afraid to think incrementally. Often that's where you find the best results.