

EDUCATION

# giving youth a chance

IKEA has put the welfare of children at the centre of its philanthropic strategy. Its ten-year 'Social Initiative' allows the company to work with NGOs and local communities to improve health and education for young people, reducing the likelihood they will drift into child labour

Kawali is a village in central India similar to many others in the country's 'cotton belt'. But the small community has something few of its neighbours can boast: a 'village motivator' in the shape of Rupali Ingle, a self-professed 'simple village girl'.

Rupali is not there to drum up enthusiasm for labour in the fields, however. Quite the contrary: she is part of home furnishings multinational IKEA's strategy to improve the welfare of 100 million children in South Asia. Her role is to raise awareness about children's rights, to limit child labour and improve school attendance.

Rupali's position, and the apparatus formed around her in the community – such as a child rights committee – is part of IKEA's ten year 'Social Initiative' programme with the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) and Save the Children to improve child welfare, mainly in India's cotton-growing regions.

IKEA's main function is to put up the money. It is currently the largest corporate donor to both organizations. But it is also an active donor, playing a decisive role in the formation of individual initiatives such as Rupali's, making sure work is done within its ten-year strategy and measuring results. It has no volunteers on the ground, but since in most areas IKEA has put up 100 per cent of the funds for

schemes, it is not surprising to hear Marianne Barner, head of Social Initiative, say: 'We follow the initiatives very closely. We are very demanding.'

The strategy, which was launched in 2005 and will run to 2015, arose from initial attempts by Ikea to work with Unicef and Save the Children to establish a code of conduct called 'the IKEA way on preventing child labour'.

IKEA soon saw that aside from its supply chain responsibilities, the company, which has a brand that relies on a family-oriented image, could usefully widen its activities to focus on the general welfare of children. Its brand outlook is that 'home is the most important place in the world, and children are the most important people in the world'. It therefore believes that working to improve the lot of children fits very snugly with its core business of helping people to 'make home'.

In 2000, IKEA joined forces with Unicef to tackle the root causes of child labour. 'Our original initiative in India was our learning period,' says Barner. 'There we dealt specifically with the problem of child labour. But then we asked ourselves: how can we contribute beyond this to help with development through financing social projects and in communities? We said, let's do this on a broader scale and work holistically.'

■ IKEA has been bringing communities together to provide children with an education throughout India's cotton-growing regions



Work is still based largely in India, but the new 'holistic' strategy of the initiative now comprises three interlinked 'focus areas': health, education and protection (which includes initiatives to reduce child labour) and women's empowerment.

On health, where the majority of Ikea's impact has been felt so far, the schemes range from encouraging breastfeeding education to programmes for improved sanitation, to work on preventable diseases.

Social Initiative has also financially supported an Integrated Management of Neonatal and Childhood Illnesses programme, which seeks to address common preventable childhood illnesses that annually kill 2.6 million children under five years of age worldwide.

The education and protection element of the programme brings together the connected issues of schooling and the prevention of child labour through various initiatives, including teacher training, the introduction of 'bridge schools' for pupils who may have fallen behind with their work, and awareness-raising programmes on children's rights.

Allied to direct work on cutting out child labour where it appears, these educational schemes provide a broader framework that reduces the temptation for parents to allow their children into the fields, hopefully creating lasting change in the area and addressing the root causes of children's rights violations.

Aside from its work with children, IKEA estimates that its female empowerment work has also benefitted many women.

All its long-term child welfare projects include 'community-based actions that empower women'. Apart from this, there is a special United Nations Development Programme scheme focussing on female empowerment that reaches 50,000 women in 500 villages.

Despite the outside technical know-how required for these projects in India, IKEA has been able to be creative in other campaigns falling under the Social Initiative remit, using its own expertise whenever possible.

The company has, for instance, engaged with customers on its Sunnan lamp scheme, in which every purchase of a solar-powered lamp results in the donation of a lamp to communities the company is working with: an important resource given that the majority of Indian children are only able to work academically at night

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## the company

IK EA was founded in 1943 in the small village of Agunnaryd in Sweden, and has grown into a retail giant with 127,000 employees in 25 countries. Its annual sales of €23.1 billion (£19bn, \$31bn) include food and garden items as well as toys, soft furnishings, carpets, electricals and other household goods. Its broad product range means a variety of responsibilities, from wood sourcing to food safety, from child labour to climate change. Recently the company has:

- introduced a 'never ending list' of its social and environmental improvements which the company has pledged to regularly add to — so far the list has 77 entries
- pledged to ensure all its buildings are supplied with 100 per cent renewable energy for electricity and heating
- partnered with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to combat illegal logging in Russia and China.

following household chores and other types of domestic work.

IK EA has also raised nearly €25 million (£21.6m, \$34.8m) as part of a campaign by which the company donates a euro to children's projects for every soft toy sold in its stores. The Social Initiative also takes responsibility for child disaster relief, and has helped out in the aftermath of recent natural catastrophes in China and Haiti.

Social Initiative is the centrepiece of IK EA's philanthropic strategy, and is the company's biggest and most expensive single programme. Barner says the company is working with Unicef and Save the Children because they are the only two global children's rights organizations, suggesting that it could become bigger yet, expanding beyond India and South Asia.

The company intends to put a lot of resources into the core activities of Social Initiative — it has committed €125m so far. But it hopes the outcomes will be priceless for millions of children and families.

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## ibe comment IKEA

IK EA's strategy is focussing on the pertinent issue of child labour, a continuing concern within any corporate supply chain. Its holistic approach, covering health, education, protection and women's empowerment, is more effective and valuable than adopting a narrow focus, as problems such as child labour can only be addressed by exploring the root causes of the issue.

### Points of interest include:

- IKEA is going beyond donations and genuinely investing in the scheme with other resources
- It is aligning the scheme with company values and branding; this is likely to ensure a continued commitment to the programme
- It is working with NGOs to enhance credibility and use specialized knowledge
- The company is clearly taking a long-term approach.