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OP-ED COLUMNIST

## A Most Meaningful Gift Idea

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Are the kids demanding the latest murder-and-mayhem video game? Do your loved ones have all the neckties/bottles of perfume/sweaters that can be used in a lifetime? Tired of celebrating spiritual holidays with crass commercialism?

If so, then perhaps it's time to try a different kind of gift. After all, nothing says "happy holidays" like donating in Aunt Tilda's name to build a composting toilet in Haiti or to deworm kids in Kenya. And a deworming pill will never be regifted!

This time of year I'm always barraged with inquiries about well-run charitable groups doing effective work. So let me tell you about some of the organizations that I've encountered that tackle global poverty in innovative ways.

In this column, I'm putting aside the larger, well-known aid organizations like CARE, Save the Children, Mercy Corps and Heifer International. They all do fabulous work, but today I want to bring to show-and-tell some organizations laboring in obscurity. These groups are also a reminder that the gap in savvy, creativity and effectiveness between the business world and the nonprofit sector is narrowing — in some cases vanishing.

So here's my quirky holiday list of nifty, unknown charities:

- Acumen Fund, [www.acumenfund.org](http://www.acumenfund.org), brings a venture capital sensibility to aid work. It invests money in for-profit businesses — like WaterHealth International, whose business model is to provide clean drinking water where none is available. Acumen also invests in LifeSpring Hospitals, which runs low-cost maternity centers where impoverished women can safely deliver babies.

Acumen argues that these businesses, because they earn profits and treat the poor as customers, are more sustainable than giveaways. This reflects a growing trend of using business mechanisms to fight poverty.

- Afghan Institute of Learning, [www.creatinghope.org](http://www.creatinghope.org), is an aid group run by Afghan women. It is led by Sakena Yacoobi, a force of nature who was educated in the United States, and it now serves 350,000 Afghan women and children annually.

Yacoobi runs education programs, training centers and clinics, emphasizing local buy-in and self-reliance. Western aid programs in Afghanistan have not always been successful, and my hunch is that if more aid had been routed through Afghan-managed programs like this, more would have been accomplished.

- BRAC, [www.brac.net](http://www.brac.net), is a Bangladeshi antipoverty organization that has had huge success serving tens of millions of people there and is now branching out to Afghanistan and Africa. It emphasizes organizing village women and promoting education, health and microfinance.

One of BRAC's strengths is its ability to turn impoverished women into agents of change for the entire community.

- Developments in Literacy, [www.dil.org](http://www.dil.org), builds terrific modern schools in Pakistan, particularly for girls. It frustrates me that rural Pakistan abounds with hard-line madrassas financed by fundamentalist Muslims who channel the students toward extremism. Extremists recognize the transformative power of education, and so should we. This is a security issue, for D.I.L. schools can help protect us from terrorism.

- Deworm the World, [www.dewormtheworld.org](http://www.dewormtheworld.org), tackles a problem most Americans don't even think about: intestinal worms. Most kids in poor countries have worms, and the result is anemia, malnutrition and sicknesses that cause absences from school. One of the most cost-effective ways of getting more children into school appears to be deworming them with one pill a year, for about 50 cents per person reached.

- SOIL, [www.oursoil.org](http://www.oursoil.org), is bringing dry, composting toilets to Haiti. Run by two remarkable American women, SOIL operates on a shoestring budget in impoverished communities.

One aim is to improve sanitation and public health. Another is to compost waste so that it can be safely used as fertilizer to boost agricultural production.

- Sustainable Health Ventures, [www.sheinnovates.com](http://www.sheinnovates.com), is a new effort to help women and girls in poor countries to manage menstruation, so that they miss less school and work. S.H.E. is trying to help African women start their own businesses based on making and distributing low-cost sanitary pads.

Although one Nepal study [found contrary evidence](#), education experts increasingly believe that a cost-effective way to keep high school girls from dropping out in poor countries is to help provide them with sanitary products and perhaps ibuprofen for cramps.

- The Worldwide Fistula Fund, [www.wfmic.org](http://www.wfmic.org), and the Fistula Foundation, [www.fistulafoundation.org](http://www.fistulafoundation.org), are dedicated to correcting a childbirth injury that is one of the worst things that can happen to a person: an obstetric fistula. This is an internal injury that leaves a girl or young woman incontinent, leaking wastes, scorned and ostracized.

A \$450 surgical repair can usually solve the problem and give these young women their lives back. For fistula sufferers, it's truly the gift of a lifetime.

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*Gail Collins is off today.*

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