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Tapan Parikh: Simple Innovations, Big Impact

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[Tapan Parikh](#) (left) has proved that innovations need not be as complex as they are made out to be. Often, simple ideas make the best impact. What makes Tapan different – and [Technology Review's 2007 Humanitarian of the Year](#) – is that he saw in mobile phones an accessible opportunity for social impact.

Tapan Parikh is the founder of a company called [Ekgaon Technologies](#). Parikh has created information systems tailored for small-business people in the developing world with the mobile phone at their core. This is made possible by the high penetration of mobile phones in developing countries.

Parikh developed [Cam](#), a toolkit to use the capability of phones to capture images and scan documents, enter and process data, and run interactive audio and video. Parikh built a software system on top of Cam to assist self-help groups in managing their information and their operations. Without requiring the users to change their style of working or reliance on paper, Parikh's tool uses a Cam-based application for entering and processing data, a text-messaging tool for uploading data to online databases, and a package of Web-based software for managing data and reporting it to any institution that has lent money to the self-help group.

This enables the self-help groups to bring greater efficiency and transparency to their internal operations, thus making them more stable. The software could also link the informal self-help groups to the formal financial sector, enabling them to get capital on better terms.

Parikh adopted the same approach in his work with fair-trade coffee farmers in Guatemala. Parikh devised a Cam system allowing farm inspectors to use mobile phones to photograph and document farms in order to ensure their compliance with quality and production standards, and to put those data online so that they are easily found by certifying agencies, wholesalers, and consumers.

When people point out these new technologies can widen the gap between the prosperous and the struggling, they are probably nitpicking. After all, no BOP offering has been able to make an impact across all segments. Some may argue that they cannot and even should not.

This might not be the panacea for all ills that does not exist – but is certainly a step in the right direction.