

How the gift of a cow can change a life forever



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In India cows are considered holy. This one even performed a miracle.

Nandini's parents hesitated before telling her the bad news, knowing it would break her heart. They slowly approached their daughter and told her she would not be going to school any more. Instead, she would have to work in a factory.

Nandini began to cry.

Her mother had been sick for a while, forcing her father to borrow 5,300 rupees – almost \$150 – from a local money lender to buy life-saving medicine. With little health care and no social safety net in rural India, families often have to borrow money in an emergency.

The medicine helped, but when the lender wanted his money back, the family couldn't pay. He became angry and demanded they send their 12-year-old daughter to work for him until the debt was repaid. They had no choice.

So for the next year, she worked in a tiny, dark room cutting imitation diamonds and rubies with a large machine. It was a dangerous job, and she often cut herself. If she made a mistake, she was beaten.

Despite being forced to work more than 80 hours a week, Nandini couldn't pay off the debt. That's because the lender charged more in interest than he paid as salary. No matter how long she worked, the debt would never go away. Nandini feared she would be there forever.

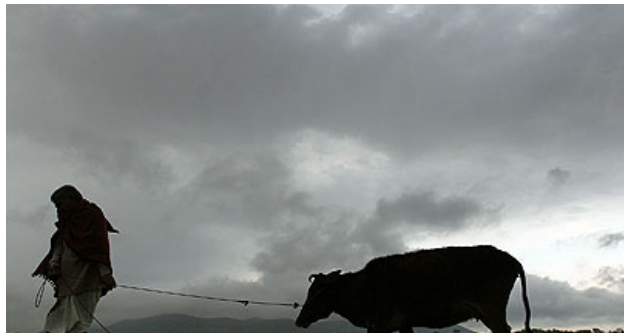
Then a cow changed everything.

Back at the house, her struggling father and sick mother were given a cow by an aid organization working in their community. It didn't seem like a lot at the time, but it would transform their lives.

The cow produced seven litres of milk a day, half of which they sold. Within two months, the family raised enough money to pay off the loan – interest included – and to free Nandini from the factory.

That wasn't all.

The money made from selling milk meant Nandini's family could start eating more. They now have three meals a day, instead of one. And they're no longer at risk of calcium deficiency, a common problem in



AP PHOTO

A man walks with his cow as rain clouds gather in Sangchari, 35 kilometers of Gauhati, India, April 10, 2007.

developing countries, thanks to the milk they keep for themselves. The cow's manure is also a great fertilizer for their crops.

The family even used the manure to strengthen the walls of their hut and fix their cracked roof. Their house no longer leaks in the rainy season, and they now have an electric fan to keep them cool in the 50-degree heat, something they couldn't afford before.

Nandini has since returned to school. She has a new uniform – two, in fact – and can afford whatever books and supplies she needs. Nandini says she can now concentrate on her studies because she isn't hungry any more and doesn't worry about her family the way she used to.

Their cow has already had two calves, which they sold. With that extra money, the family bought a pair of goats to ensure they have enough milk to sell for years to come. If someone else falls ill, they won't have to send their daughter into bonded labour again.

Nandini's mother has now recovered. She was even feeling well enough to run for election in the village council. She won, and now teaches other local women how to start a small business. Nandini and her friends have formed a club to help stop child labour, talking with local parents about the importance of sending children, especially daughters, to school.

In less than a year, the family's fortunes have completely turned around – all thanks to a single cow.

Their story shows that there are different ways to help people in the developing world. While official foreign aid from governments and international banks can help build roads, telecommunications and other essentials, there is another kind of grassroots development being driven by the power of the individual.

Buying a cow, goat or pig for a family overseas is just one way to help. Many charities in Canada allow people to purchase one at an affordable price. And there are other options as well, from helping fund a school to building a community well, which can change a life forever.

Last year, the Bangladesh-based Grameen Bank was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for helping impoverished villagers, mostly women, set up their own businesses by giving them small loans. An astonishing 98 per cent of them were able to become economically independent and pay back what they borrowed. Many even used their loans to buy cows and goats.

This kind of people-driven development, once seen as secondary to government aid, is now proving that it is just as important, by giving opportunities to those who had none. With the tools to succeed, people are finding ways to lift themselves out of poverty.

And in our interconnected world, everyone can play a role in making sure those tools are available.

Craig and Marc Kielburger are founders of *Free the Children* and co-authors of *Me to We*.