

Profile: Technology for Tomorrow Limited

Inexpensive, locally produced pads are providing women with safe, clean sanitary care and providing disadvantaged people with jobs



Challenge

Lack of sanitary pads is a major problem in Africa, where millions of girls and women have no choice but to resort to unhygienic and inadequate alternatives, such as newspaper, old rags, and ashes, which cause chafing and reproductive tract infections. One out of 10 African schoolgirls does not attend school during menstruation (UNESCO 2014), and women lose five years of unearned wages during a lifetime because of work absences during menstruation (Nextbillion 2013). One of the biggest unserved populations is female refugees, millions of whom lack access to pads.



Most of the pads these women produce are distributed in refugee camps.

Innovation

Technology for Tomorrow Limited (T4T), based at Makerere University in Kampala, has developed several products to support low-income communities. Its Maka (Menstruation, Administration, Knowledge, and Affordability) sanitary pads are made of local papyrus and paper waste provided from shredded recycled paper provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). The four factories that produce the pads employ marginalized groups, including people living with HIV, refugees, abductees of the Lord's Resistance Army, and economically disadvantaged women in Kampala.

A 10-pad packs costs USD 0.41–0.54, about 50–75 percent less than commercially available products. The pads disintegrate in a pit latrine within a year, overcoming the problem of waste. The little electricity need to produce them can be generated by a solar panel.

UNHCR distributes about 90 percent of all MakaPads, distributing them in Ugandan refugee camps. T4T also produces pads for two NGOs, One School at a Time in Uganda and One Girl in Sierra Leone. In addition to the pads, T4T has developed special incinerators for the disposable of degradable waste that function without wood or electricity. They have been installed at schools, hospitals, and clinics.

Impact

MakaPads have improved the health and quality of life of 55,000 refugees in Uganda, increased female school attendance, and reduced the environmental damage caused by sanitary pads. T4T has also created livelihood opportunities for about 250 people from vulnerable groups, including 65 refugees in its factory at the Kyaka II camp. Employees earn up to USD 200 a month.

Scaling Up

T4T has grown over the past few years. Most of its growth has been from bulk orders from UNHCR, but the business has also expanded to Sierra Leone via One Girl.

T4T plans to expand further by strengthening direct distribution in rural areas via sales agents. It is also considering expanding to Kenya, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, all countries in which UNHCR has expressed an interest in setting up factories in refugee camps.

T4T earns a profit, which it keeps low in order to achieve its social goals. The company is very vulnerable, however, as 90 percent of its sales come from a single customer (UNHCR). Efforts to diversify the customer base have only slowly been yielding results. The Ugandan Ministry of Education declined to partner with the company, despite a successful pilot in 12 schools. The perception in Uganda that local products are inferior to imported ones also constrains growth.

References

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