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2010

Mira - Intermediary for Micro-Philanthropy

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Citation

Lien Centre for Social Innovation. Mira - Intermediary for Micro-Philanthropy. (2010). *Social Space*. 146-147.

Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/lien_research/52

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Mira

Intermediary for Micro-Philanthropy

Beneficiary country: Cambodia / Southeast Asia



Mira meeting with an NGO in Cambodia in October 2009, to assess possible candidates for the project.

Lack of access, or financial means, continue to be the most significant reason for why up to 18 million children in Southeast Asia are not enrolled in schools. Mira's goal is to make education universally accessible by creating a personalised scholarship fund online that is self-managed and data-driven, enabling a collaborative sponsorship model that links funders to a particular student, with real-time updates from both parties.

THE THEORY/PROBLEM

More than 18 million children in Southeast Asia who are of primary-school age are not enrolled in school. While reasons for this are not conclusive, available studies point to the minimal resources that are needed to incentivise them to remain in school e.g. U.S.\$6 for uniforms in Kenya. However it appears that giving scholarships, rather than simply defraying costs, is a specific motivator. This also has a multiplier effect in encouraging friends of recipients.

THE INNOVATIVE IDEA

Similar to Kiva Microfunds and DonorsChoose (international micro-loan organisations), Mira is next in line to push for a donor model that is more personalised, self-managed and data-driven by leveraging on information flow through the web. Mira's concept facilitates an affordable and personalised scholarship fund, collaborative sponsorship between funders for a particular student and real-time updates from funders and candidates.

Organisation Bio

Mira is a non-profit organisation dedicated to empowering every child to reach his or her full potential by making education universally accessible. The organisation uses online platforms to fund innovative social projects that benefit children around the world.

<http://mirascholars.org/blog/about/>

IMPLEMENTATION

Mira's base operations are in California, U.S. and Singapore. Starting with its first project sites in Cambodia, it focuses on four objectives for the year:

1. Recruiting site partners;
2. Improving online service based on funder needs;
3. Fund-raising and
4. Identifying corporate sponsorship opportunities.

In the meantime, the website is going through the testing stage with a prototype ready by July 2010 and the full official release slated for January 2011.

STEPS TAKEN TO IMPLEMENT PROJECT

- Since receiving the Lien i3 Award, Mira has been working on building its product – an innovative online system allowing everyday donors to fund education-related projects in developing countries.
- Mira is also interviewing a myriad of NGOs to establish what needs exist on the ground.
- The initial model Mira intended to use was to raise funds student-by-student by posting profiles related to school costs online.
- After speaking to credible NGOs in Cambodia, the team realised there would be selection bias and other unforeseen issues.
- Another model was then implemented, which will work on a group or project basis with at least 5 children in each group.
- Mira's core team members also undertook trips to the beneficiary country (Cambodia) to undertake a needs assessment of several NGOs evaluating their financial and operational credibility.

IMMEDIATE CHALLENGES TO PROJECT

- The process of developing a product and bringing it to the market is the first challenge.
- Ensuring that the product Mira creates will be useful to NGOs on the ground is the second challenge.

- The process of working across two countries to address operational development has been challenging.
- Mira's project is a platform or conduit for funders and NGOs to be matched. The challenge with this is that donors want accountability and transparency, as well as impact, while NGOs struggle to manage relationships, effectively present their projects and receive funding.
- Building a tool that will make this relationship more effective is also a challenge.
- Identifying genuine NGOs and making sure the work is legitimate requires a lot of time on the ground.

PLANS FOR ENGAGING WITH COMMUNITY

- The platform is designed to allow for NGOs to first enter the U.S. donor market and subsequently to expand worldwide. U.S. donors prefer to go through U.S.-based NGOs—a role that Mira fulfills because of its adherence to strict government regulations pertaining to philanthropic organisations.
- Mira is essentially a free tool for NGOs, who will not have to pay anything to use the service.
- Overheads are low and applying for funding via Mira should considerably shorten the donation process.
- In essence, the NGO community will be given the tools to become actively engaged in receiving donor funds for their education-centred projects.
- If NGOs have their own website, Mira can build tools for them to advertise their own website as well, so that the two sites are integrated.

COMMUNITY RESPONSE TO PROJECT

- NGOs are keen for this to work because funding is a perennial problem.
- Many more donors are looking to donate online and we can also meet this need.



The Mira Team: Simon Tam, Jens Thang and Sara Ortega (L-R)



Sarah Ortega, Co-Founder, Mira (far right) talking to two Mira volunteers in San Francisco.