

Elephant Energy

Helps Light the Night

While visiting Namibia on a consulting job for the World Wildlife Fund, attorney Doug Vilsack recognized the need for renewable-powered lighting, especially in the rural areas, where most households have no access to the grid and must burn candles, kerosene, or wood for light. It was only after a law school acquaintance gave him a BoGo (Buy one, Give one) solar flashlight that he realized what he could do to help.

He collected \$10 donations from his Facebook friends, and quickly raised enough money to buy 50 BoGo flashlights. On his next consulting trip to Namibia, he distributed the BoGos to game rangers, who used the lights to startle and scare away crop-destroying elephants that, in a few hours, can decimate a family's entire year's food supply.

Inspired by the rangers' success stories, Vilsack wanted to do more and launched Elephant Energy (EE), a nonprofit whose mission is: "Light in every home, clean air in every kitchen, power in every hand."

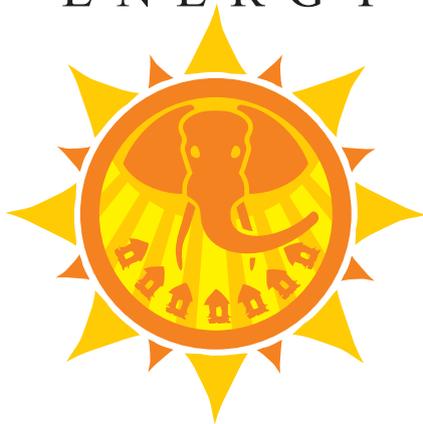
Elephant Energy founder Doug Vilsack (far right), with friends in Namibia.



Courtesy: Elephant Energy

"I pushed forward because of the clear impact that these lights had on people's lives," says Vilsack. "Plus, the economics made sense—people spend \$5 to \$6 each month on kerosene and could reinvest these funds in solar technologies."

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Under Vilsack's direction, EE is establishing a network for distributing renewable energy products to rural areas throughout Namibia. Vilsack and a small team of volunteers travel from village to village to sell the products to rural shop owners and entrepreneurs.

EE then acts as the supplier, providing the goods at wholesale prices that allow shop owners to sell the lights at fair prices and still earn a good profit. If necessary, EE will subsidize or provide financing for the first batch of

products—after that, shop owners must reinvest their profits to replenish and grow their inventory.

"Subsidizing is not sustainable—for our organization or for the Namibian people," Vilsack says. "We are there as an incubator for the first push of these products."

Early on, seed money for projects came largely from social funding campaigns, but the nonprofit group adopted a unique "for-profit mentality" to ensure its staying power. "We did not want our longevity as an organization to be at the mercy of grants and donations. Instead, we take a market-based approach and derive our funding from retail sales. That gives us a sustainable income to continue helping people," says Katie Murphy, the group's Africa program director. "Our goal is to be unnecessary in this equation."

After gauging the response to the initial batch of solar flashlights over several months, EE raised the funds to distribute and market lights to nearly 1,000 households in two conservancies (a bounded area of communal land governed by its members). Sobbe

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Conservancy purchased flashlights at a subsidized price and distributed them to members, while Wuparo Conservancy sold lights directly to its members for \$7—the amount a family would normally spend on candles each month.

The solar flashlights spurred local interest in other solar-powered products, driving EE to open a shop in Katima Mulilo, the capital of the Caprivi Strip. In the first two months, the shop sold more than 250 items.

The products—hand-crank radios, solar-powered lights, and cell phone chargers, ranging in price from \$10 to \$60—are supplied by companies based in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, but manufactured in China. “I’m often asked why we aren’t teaching the people how to make the products locally. The reality is that, if we built them in Africa, they’d be four times more expensive and no one could afford them,” Vilsack says.

To extend its reach and keep costs down, EE also relies on existing distribution channels—including a network of 26 rural bike shops established by Bicycles for Humanity (bicycles-for-humanity.org). In addition, EE provides products through eight energy shops established by the Namibian government and the Polytechnic University of Namibia.

This year, EE quadrupled its sales, distributing 2,000-plus items to an estimated 10,000 users (about one product per household with an average of five people), creating upwards of \$3,500 in revenue. Bulk sales have increased as well, including the sale of 240 solar-powered lights to World Wildlife Fund game rangers.

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Closer to home, Doug Vilsack is providing solar lights to the Navajo Nation in New Mexico, Arizona, and Utah. Dubbed Eagle Energy by the Navajo, EE is working to bring renewable energy options to rural Navajo families—many of which do not have access to the electricity grid, and still rely on wood and kerosene. To learn more, visit elephantenergy.org.

Despite such impressive strides, EE is still a long way from making its exit. The primary obstacle is geography, according to Tim Weiss, a volunteer with EE in Namibia. “Most of the people we serve get their income in a variety of ways and at very inconsistent times,” Weiss says. “This volatility in their income requires us to develop creative, flexible financing solutions, or have products available at the exact right time and place, which means we must go to the customer. This is very challenging because of how remote these villages are and how far apart they are from each other.”

“Affordable small-scale solar technology is a perfect fit for many of these people because it fills their fundamental energy needs while actually saving them money,” he adds. “When I travel through rural villages at night and see people either using candles, kerosene, or just living in darkness, it motivates me—all people should have access to light that is clean, safe, affordable, and bright.”

—Kelly Davidson



Courtesy: Elephant Energy