



# small steps or giant strides?

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by Purnima Coontoor

Gazing down at the little specks of habitation from an aircraft preparing to land last month, I felt utterly small and insignificant compared to the vastness of the universe. The same feeling assails me when I read the newspaper each morning – but while the former filled me with awe, the latter fills me with impotent helplessness. Can anything I do make a difference to the myriad economic, social, political and environmental problems that pose a threat to our very existence, I wonder.

The January issue of *Life Positive*, with its messages from various gurus provided much needed succour with their wisdom. When I came across Small Steps, an initiative to reduce usage of plastic by an organisation based in Auroville, Pondicherry, I was inspired by the willingness of the people involved to make a difference – the conviction with which they have undertaken it, the confidence with which they are executing it, and the compassion that they are demonstrating.

Uma Prajapati, a professional fashion designer from Delhi, visited Auroville for a two-week project, which proved to be a turning point in her life. Inspired by the ideals of Auroville she went back, resigned from her job, and returned to live there permanently. She founded Upasana, a design studio, in 1997 to manufacture garments based on traditional Indian textiles. “After the tsunami in 2004, Upasana ventured into the application of design into social change,” says Uma, “Small Steps, initiated in 2006, is a project in that direction.”

Small Steps is based on the premise that it is not necessary to take big steps and big actions to make a difference. The initiative tackles the huge issue of environmental damage to earth due to irresponsible usage of plastic. It dissuades people from using plastic bags, and offers them the environmental-friendly option of cloth bags instead.

Small Steps has already created jobs for 20 men and 200 women from 10 villages, and, with a target of making 10 million bags, has the potential to create jobs for 1000 people. No money is taken for the bags. The project is financed through donations, run by volunteers and the bags are distributed as gifts. The project is based on the radical concept of Gift Economy – people and organisations are invited to be project guardians to help with funds to make more bags and carry on. At a time, says Uma, 20 to 50 volunteers from different professional backgrounds like communication, graphics, management, social development, designers, students, and housewives are involved with Small Steps.

The project is led by Uma, guided by Manoj Pavitran, co-ordinated by Vimal Bhojraj, and assisted by Vijay Tiwari.

Small Steps has created a small revolution in the several ways in which people can get involved in environmental conservation. As a utilitarian item, as a symbol of environmental responsibility, or as tool of community awareness – a Small Steps bag invites people to carry one, and keep the movement going and growing. Uma says that the project has reached more than 80,000 people in different parts of India and abroad, and



The Small Steps team

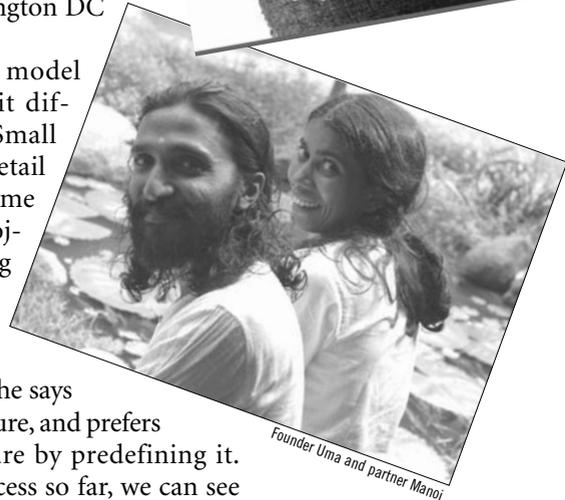
the feedback so far has been overwhelming, with the government showing an interest in it too. “We go to schools very often to make presentations and the response among the children is superb,” she exults, “we have ambassadors for Small Steps in many states of India and many countries abroad, with the strongest presence in Europe and USA.” When the project was launched in Auroville in 2007, Small Steps had its ambassadors marching in a parade in Washington DC on Earth Day.

The gift economy model however has made it difficult to distribute Small Steps bags through retail outlets and to overcome this difficulty the project team is planning to introduce a retail version of the bag. Ask Uma ‘what next for Small Steps’, and she says it is a call from the future, and prefers not to limit the future by predefining it. But going by her success so far, we can see her taking giant strides in the cause of social upliftment.

Upasana's other ongoing projects include the 'Tsunamiika' ([www.tsunamiika.org](http://www.tsunamiika.org)) started to help the tsunami victims in coastal Tamil Nadu, and Varanasi Weavers ([www.varanasiweavers.org](http://www.varanasiweavers.org)), which helps the weavers of Varanasi who are facing a crisis. Website: [www.smallsteps.in](http://www.smallsteps.in)

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article.

Mail us at [editor@lifepositive.net](mailto:editor@lifepositive.net)



Founder Uma and partner Manoj