

## Helping the world one suitcase at a time

by Hans Tammemagi



We live in luxury, surrounded by cell phones, flat-screen TVs, cars and theatres. Yet, much of the world is far less fortunate; many regions are mired in poverty, suffering from HIV/AIDS and caught up in corruption and warfare.

It's heart breaking. How can TMAC members help?

The traditional answer to this complex question is to give money to charities and let them wrestle with the mechanics. However, problems lurk. First, many TMACers are not wealthy; we simply don't have a lot to give. Furthermore, many charities are under a shadow. Are they a scam? Are their administration fees too high?

Even with reputable charities, does your donation help the needy or does it wind up in the grasp of greedy government officials or criminals?

Here's an experience I recently had. Before departing to Namibia, I'd heard that some of their rural schools are so desperate for supplies that when pencils arrive, the teachers cut them into halves or thirds so more students can share. I wanted to help.

After some Internet research, I discovered the website [www.packforapurpose.com](http://www.packforapurpose.com), which urges travellers to pack supplies in their suitcase when visiting poverty-stricken areas. It's a wonderful website operated by volunteers who care. The site is easy to use. I clicked on the continent (Africa), then the country I was going to visit (Namibia) and then saw a list of drop-off sites. The website also provided a list of needed supplies, a description of how they will be used and maps to the drop-off sites.

What an elegant method! Instead of donating cash, individuals bring physical goods. After all, what can the unscrupulous do with crayons, notebooks and vitamins? Administrative costs are minimized since we travellers do the acquisition of supplies and delivery.

For Namibia, only two drop-off sites were listed and, unfortunately, I wasn't going to either. I contacted the website manager, Rebecca Rothney, who found a charity that would pick up the supplies at my hotel.

I gathered together surplus pens and USB memory sticks I had obtained mostly at TMAC events. I also purchased some pencils and sharpeners. To my surprise, when the clerk at Staples learned where the pencils were going, she donated various additional items. Furthermore, three TMAC members kindly responded to my listserv invitation and donated memory sticks and pencils. The total package (about 100 memory sticks, 210 pencils, 100 pens, 10 exercise books, 10 erasers, 5 sharpeners, box of crayons) took up only a small fraction of my suitcase. And it was simple to drop the package at the front desk of the hotel.

OK, I admit this was only a tiny step. But it felt good, especially when I learned the children who received the crayons and pencils were overjoyed.

So, how to build on this? Fortunately, we TMAC members, with our frequent travel, are perfectly positioned. I encourage everyone planning a trip to a Third World country to visit [www.packforapurpose.com](http://www.packforapurpose.com) and plan to carry along some supplies. The TMAC listserv could be used to solicit additional supplies from fellow members, and Munch & Mingles and the AGM could be collection points for bringing these supplies together. Then, simply pack the materials in your suitcase and deliver them.

Let's make this work. Suitcase by suitcase we can help relieve poverty. Side benefits: it would raise TMAC's profile, and it also brings a lot of satisfaction.

I welcome your ideas and personal experiences.

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