



The Appropriate Technology Collaborative
Opportunity by Design

Ann Arbor-based nonprofit wins global sustainability award



Mayan women learn how solar power works and how to wire a solar power system with technology created by The Appropriate Technology Collaborative, an Ann Arbor-based non-profit organization. The ATC was recognized for its efforts as a global leader in creating sustainable solutions to promote clean energy, access to clean water and economic development for the world's poorest citizens. Photo provided



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ANN ARBOR, MI – On a trip to the rural countryside of Ecuador in 2004, John Barrie noticed homes would bake in the sunlight during the day and be covered with frost on the underside of their roofs at night.

With a background in creating sustainable technology and a newfound desire to bring affordable energy efficiency to that portion of the world, Barrie, a longtime architect in Ann Arbor, has connected with people from across Guatemala in bringing small-scale solar lighting to 3,000 people since 2007.

The Appropriate Technology Collaborative, an Ann Arbor-based nonprofit organization, was the result of those brainstorming sessions. The ATC was recognized for those efforts as a global leader in creating sustainable solutions to promote clean energy, access to clean water and economic development for the world's poorest citizens.

The ATC is among the world's top 100 leaders in global sustainability according to results announced June 7 by Sustainia, a Copenhagen-based firm working in partnership with the United Nations Sustainable Development Program.

"I thought, instead of having a handful of wealthy clients, I could have 2 billion clients that don't have much in terms of wealth, but have a great need," said Barrie, a former Ann Arbor-based architect and alumnus of the U-M school of architecture.

ATC's Mayan Power and Light project assists low-income women in rural Guatemala in starting and maintaining clean energy businesses.

ATC provides cutting-edge training and technical assistance and incubates environmentally sustainable microbusinesses in rural communities in Guatemala, Nicaragua and India.

"We're moving from a nonprofit to the private sector," said Barrie, who also has served as an adjunct professor of architecture at U-M. "With a for profit business, if we can create products for low-income people and make a profit, then those businesses are sustainable into the foreseeable future. If (ATC) quit tonight, they would still be in business for years into the future.

"The idea is we're using market principles to create businesses that are going to be around for a long time," he added. "Every product we help design is within the reach of the very poorest people to purchase to enhance their own lives."

In the early stages, Barrie said the ATC worked to bring solar power panels that would cost less than having to purchase kerosene or candles. The solar power solutions also would allow residents the ability to charge their cell phones, which Guatemalans are able to receive calls on for free.

"Over six months they could buy a solar power system that is brighter and healthier that would last six years," he said. "So for 5.5 years, they could have free lighting at night. In addition to that, they could avoid making a 90-minute walk to go charge their cell phone and have to wait three hours to charge it in the city."

ATC has since gone on to kick-start 13 small businesses in rural Guatemala since 2015. The businesses, which are operated by Guatemalan women entrepreneurs, now serve 10,000 people, selling solar panels, clean cook stoves, and other appropriate technology at prices that are affordable for rural agricultural workers.

"Mayan Power and Light makes it possible for us to reach thousands of people with the essential technologies of solar energy, clean water and firewood saving stoves, thereby improving the lives of those who have little access to basic services," said Natalia Xec Poz, who lives in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and is director of sales for Mayan Power and Light.

As one of the Sustainia 100 for 2016, ATC's Mayan Power and Light project is eligible for the grand Sustainia Award, to be selected by a committee led by former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger and presented this coming fall in Copenhagen.

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