An organisation based in the Netherlands is helping firms which want to make their mark in terms of social responsibility but aren’t sure how to go about it in a tangible way. EsteamWork started four years ago when its founder Machiel van Dooren observed that a growing number of companies wanted to take CSR seriously but didn’t know how to get the maximum impact. He also found that non-governmental organisations (NGOs) at times needed outside expertise in areas other than their own, which is primarily in humanitarian aid.

So how does EsteamWork help, say, a coffee cooperative of 50,000 associated farmers in the foothills of Kilimanjaro move from manual financial book-keeping and reporting to a computer-based system?

"We act as an intermediary and create a partnership," says Sophie van Berckel, a project manager with EsteamWork, “and we facilitate the process whereby both sides achieve their goals.”

Matching competencies

“Our strength lies in matching corporate competencies and the potential of the organisation, with challenges that NGOs face in the field,” says Jop Blom, director of EsteamWork. For example, a few years ago, the Ethiopian government gave a plot of prime land to the Ethiopian Red Cross Society (ERCS). As real estate was not its area of expertise, the ERCS approached the Netherlands Red Cross (NRC) for assistance. The NRC, in collaboration with EsteamWork, took a group of real estate experts on a fact-finding mission to Ethiopia and advised the ERCS on the best way to develop the piece of land.

The ‘learning journey’: Where social responsibility meets its match

Learning Journeys

‘EsteamWork’ combines two key elements: ‘esteem’ and ‘team work’. The programme it offers – referred to as a ‘learning journey’ – is designed for professionals working together as a team on real projects at either small- to medium-sized companies or development organisations in a developing country, for a limited period of time. The team usually consists of about eight individuals who work on site with the NGO or local organisation in the developing country and help them find a solution to their problem. The ‘learning journey’ takes eight to 14 days.

Kagera coffee union - INSEAD Knowledge
Moving toward computer-based administration in the Kagera Coffee Union in Tanzania

“The process brings benefits because of the ‘natural fit of resources and needs,’” says van Berckel. “The private company achieves the social image that it desires and, in the process, develops the management and leadership skills of its employees.” She says the host organisation benefits

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from the expertise of the professionals and, together, they help to improve the lives of those in the local community. “The participant, besides benefiting from professional and personal development, gets to live out his dream of making a difference in the world.”

‘A life-changing experience’

“The participants are challenged to deliver solutions using knowledge that they are well-versed in,” says van Berckel. However, the circumstances and rules of the ‘game’ in the host country differ greatly from what they are used to back home in the Netherlands. In addition, they have to get to grips with a new culture, learn how to work with the local community and come up with a solution – all in just a couple of days.

“It’s a strange environment with new possibilities and unexpected windfalls and setbacks,” muses van Berckel, “which makes for a unique, unforgettable and life-changing experience.”

Blom says that after participants return from the programme, they come back transformed and spread the news about CSR, motivating others within their organisations to get involved and even initiating some CSR projects themselves. As more and more employees become interested in CSR, the projects multiply.

‘Bridging the social gap’

Blom’s business card simply says ‘Social Entrepreneur’ under his name. “EsteamWork is pioneering work with a new approach towards bridging the social gap. It supports entrepreneurs and organisations in developing countries through the financing of the programme by private companies,” he explains.

The for-profit organisation is proud that it is financially independent. Its turnover last year amounted to 300,000 euros, with an unexpected profit of 40,000 euros. That means they are now at about breakeven as in the previous start-up years they suffered a loss of 30,000 euros. “Our aim is not to maximise profit but to maximise (our) impact in society,” Blom says, adding that he believes EsteamWork will continue to grow because private companies are now proactive about CSR.

Citing the World Food Programme where TNT invested 10 million euros with 18 employees working mostly full time on it, Blom says that smaller companies are not able to do that. Instead, he says they would prefer to outsource their CSR projects to a one-stop organisation such as EsteamWork for, say, 10,000 euros and avoid the hassle of managing it themselves.