

The Crofter: Sustainable Communications

SECTION EDITOR



Kimi Uegaki
kimi@iwrite.nu

Editorial

Greetings from the croft. One of the things that I appreciate about the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) is how they made me realise that sustainability extends beyond climate change. The SDGs also remind me about inter-relatedness between environmental, social (including health), and economic issues, and how there are multiple ways to make a positive contribution. I'm inspired by the contributions fellow EMWA member Nicole Bezuidenhout makes to sustainability through

her volunteer work for a nonprofit called Lightup Impact. In this edition of the Crofter, Nicole and her colleagues from Lightup Impact, Valeria Santoro and Jeniffer Muganda, delve deeper into the concepts of sustainable development, the SDGs that Lightup Impact aims to address, and how effective communication has been key to their success. We also asked Nicole some questions to learn more about how she became a volunteer with Lightup Impact, how her volunteer work and day job complement each other, and other things.

It's also my pleasure to introduce Louisa Ludwig-Begall and Sarah Kabani who are taking over the reigns as co-editors of the Crofter. Both have been directly involved in much needed sustainability-related healthcare research and are keen sustainability enthusiasts. Be sure to get in touch with them to discuss ideas and share your sustainability experiences. Happy reading!

Best,
Kimi

Breaking barriers in sustainable development in East Africa: How Lightup Impact is leveraging communications to shift the power to the right actors

Nicole Bezuidenhout, Valeria Santoro,
Jeniffer Muganda

Lightup Impact

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Correspondence to

Nicole Bezuidenhout

nicole.bezuidenhout@lightupimpact.com

Lightup Impact is an online community of 125 early-stage, locally led nonprofits (also known as grassroots organisations) focusing on gender and health in East Africa. As part of the grassroots movement, these organisations represent everyday people coming together to address local challenges, like poverty, lack of healthcare and education, and discrimination against marginalised groups. They mobilise resources and develop projects and programmes to drive social- and systems change from the ground up, focusing on addressing root causes rather than symptoms. Lightup Impact shifts the power to these young visionary leaders, located across Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania, and supports them with networking, trust-based

partnerships, skills development, and guidance to increase their visibility and long-term success.¹

Together we address seven of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG):

- No poverty
- Good health and well-being
- Quality education
- Gender equality
- Decent work and economic growth
- Reduced inequalities
- Partnership for the goals

Lightup Impact envisions a society where grassroots organisations are empowered and sustainable. To achieve that, we want to create a mindset shift towards collaboration, where grassroots leaders in East Africa can work together with one another or with external partners to achieve shared goals. We have embraced the global #ShiftThePower movement to shift the power away from external agencies toward local people by giving them the tools, know-how, and guidance to design and deliver programmes for community development. Thus, we are reforming the practice of development aid and institutional philanthropy.²

An essential component of the work we do as a nonprofit is communications (comms). That being said, there are enormous obstacles associated with comms in the nonprofit sector, especially one that focuses on a complex subject like sustainability. Additionally, nonprofit comms differ immensely from that in the for-profit sector, which most of us are more familiar with. At Lightup Impact, we are a small core team of five members (only one of which is a comms professional) supported by part-time volunteers in graphic design, legal, and finance. Despite these limited resources, we regularly communicate with our stakeholders to maintain and build relationships and partnerships, share knowledge, raise awareness and funds for various causes, and spread the good news about our community's impact. In this article, we dive into the challenges of nonprofit comms and the key ways in which one can successfully communicate in this sector and about sustainable development.

A driving force

The UN SDGs comprise 17 goals of the international project that aims to end poverty and achieve equality while protecting the environ-

ment. It goes hand-in-hand with key strategies to improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth.³ For readers of the Crofter, terms or concepts like sustainability or the SDGs are quite recognisable. But most people do not have any idea about these and probably would not be able to name one SDG. This situation is actually not strange at all, as the SDGs are not very frequently or well-communicated to the masses. And this has likely also played a role in the slow progress toward achieving these goals.⁴ On November 22, 2023, the www.sdgs.un.org/goals webpage sported 3,862 events hosted, 1,327 publications published, and 7,780 actions taken since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development by all of the UN Member States (193 countries) in 2015.⁵ This appears to be quite impressive, but according to a *Nature* article, it looks like none of the goals and just 12% of the 169 targets set will have been met by the 2030 deadline.⁶

In September 2023, leaders from around the world gathered in New York City to develop a rescue plan that involved better international cooperation and coordination across various topics and disciplines. Jeniffer Muganda, who works as the Public Relations and Strategic Partnerships Manager at Lightup Impact, attended the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) Youth Forum 2023 in preparation for the UN SDGs Summit in September. At the forum, it became clear that young people, despite constituting the majority of the world's population, are often excluded from decision-making processes. This exclusion leads to decision-makers being out of touch with the realities of the masses, which can be detrimental to creating a sustainable future. It is important for young people to take an active role in shaping the future they desire. At the UN SDG Summit 2023, it became evident that young people are the driving force for change. This served as a wake-up call to global leaders, reminding them that it's time to engage in an inclusive conversation and commit to achieving the SDGs together.

At Lightup Impact, we acknowledge the importance of placing young grassroots leaders at the forefront of decision-making and ensuring their participation in the concerns outlined for rapid and effective action towards sustainability. We emphasise the significance of our work and that of our members in creating sustainable social change locally. On another note, for those keeping track, *Nature* is monitoring the progress toward and success stories of the SDGs at the local, regional, and global scale by collecting and featuring relevant articles.⁷

Table 1. Key differences in communication between nonprofit and for-profit organisations

Nonprofit	For-profit
Driven by	
Typically focus on communicating their mission and the social impact they aim to achieve. Messaging revolves around the organisation's values, purpose, and the positive change it seeks to make in the world.	Often emphasise their products or services, competitive advantages, and financial benefits for customers. Messaging is generally profit-driven and aims to highlight value propositions that attract customers and generate revenue.
Stakeholder engagement	
Often engage a diverse range of stakeholders, including donors, volunteers, beneficiaries, and community members. Communication strategies prioritise building relationships and trust with these groups to garner support for the organisation's cause.	Primarily focus on customers, shareholders, and employees. Communications are geared towards customer satisfaction, investor relations, and maintaining a positive corporate image to enhance market position.
Funding and resource constraints	
Frequently operate with limited budgets, relying on donations, grants, and fundraising efforts. Communications often involve crafting compelling narratives to inspire financial support and mobilise resources.	Generate revenue through the sale of goods or services. Their communications are geared toward promoting products, expanding market share, and increasing profitability.
Measuring success	
Success in the nonprofit sector is often measured by the organisation's impact on its mission. Key performance indicators may include the number of lives improved, communities served, or social issues addressed.	Success in the for-profit sector is typically measured in financial terms, such as revenue, profit margins, and market share. Customer satisfaction and brand loyalty also play crucial roles.
Focus	
Nonprofits often have a long-term focus on addressing social issues and creating lasting change. Communications strategies may involve educating the public about systemic problems and advocating for policy changes.	For-profit organisations are often driven by short-term financial goals, with communications strategies emphasising immediate gains, market trends, and adapting to consumer demands.

Effective comms for sustainable growth

Comms in the nonprofit sector differ enormously from the for-profit sector in several key ways, reflecting the distinct goals, structures, and audiences of these two types of organisations (see Table 1). For a communicator switching from one to the other, it can be challenging to get it right. Furthermore, comms in the nonprofit

sector, particularly in the context of sustainability-focused organisations, presents its own set of challenges when it comes to communicating effectively, namely:

- **Limited resources:** Most nonprofits operate with incredibly limited budgets, impacting an organisation's ability to carry out comprehensive communication strategies.



- **Engaging diverse stakeholders:** From donors to policymakers and the average person with an interest, sustainability involves a wide range of stakeholders with many different interests. Navigating and engaging effectively with this diverse audience in a way that ensures that each communication resonates and encourages action is tough.
- **Complex messaging:** Sustainability is still not widely accepted, and sustainability issues are complex and multifaceted, differing immensely from one community to another. Communicating this topic and its many facets in a clear and accessible way to diverse audiences can be challenging. Additionally, finding the right language and visuals to convey specific concepts is important and needs expert execution.
- **Balancing impact and overhead messaging:** No one wants to hear about an organisation's concerns regarding administrative overhead – most people care more about the impact of the organisation's programmes. Herein lies the challenge of achieving the right balance between communicating these two aspects to donors and stakeholders who care about their investment in the organisation's cause(s).
- **Building and maintaining trust:** Probably one of the most essential aspects for ensuring long-term success is building and maintaining trust among donors, partners, and the public. It is an ongoing challenge requiring authenticity, transparent communication, accountability, and consistency.
- **Adapting to evolving trends:** Sustainability is a rapidly evolving field with changing trends, technologies, and public sentiments. Nonprofits need to remain agile and change their comms strategies to stay relevant and responsive to emerging issues and opportunities.
- **Measuring impact:** A task that is difficult even among for-profit organisations. Nonprofits in the sustainability sector often struggle to quantify and consequently communicate

their impact effectively. Impact in this sector may involve more qualitative indicators, making it challenging to convey results in a way that resonates with stakeholders and in some cases, makes it difficult to apply for grants or report to funders.

The Lightup Impact way

Lightup Impact certainly faces many of these challenges and we continuously aim to address them with strategic planning, creativity, and a strong commitment to ongoing improvement in our comms practices. Our audience comprises a variety of actors, but our community of young grassroots leaders is at the heart of our strategy. To ensure they relate to us, we communicate in a young, creative, and inspiring way. Other stakeholders include our community of supporters and donors around the world, corporate organisations, other social entrepreneurs, partner non-governmental organisations, and civil society at large.

Despite being resilient and proactive, our overall approach is community- and youth-led, and we have implemented a strategy that relies on tapping into each other's networks for expertise or support; we want to learn from our community as much as we want them to learn through or from us. This was beautifully illustrated when we teamed up with the East African Philanthropy Network (EAPN) to co-host our 2nd annual conference, Lightup Impact Days 2023.⁸ As the largest philanthropy support organisation in the region,⁹ EAPN leveraged their extensive network and comms capabilities to elevate our event's reach and impact. They also supported us with improved design expertise, event coordination, and specialised insights into key topics of discussion, such as equity, systemic change, youth empowerment, support of marginalised groups, and impact in philanthropy. Additionally, we formed, for the first time ever, a

community-elected Founder Committee made up of young grassroots leaders and Lightup Impact community members to voice the needs and wishes of the community at large and provide support in many different aspects of the event's organisation and management. For example, they acted as moderators and speakers of key panel discussions during our conference and actively communicated with delegates throughout; one member even took over our Instagram account for a day, posting relevant content throughout and giving our online community an authentic look into our

conference activities. This level of engagement and support from our community for our community is what sets us apart from other organisations. "Lightup Impact is the best consortia I have been part of so far", our member from Uganda, Bridget Kigambo from Girl Potential Care Center, told us.

"What I like the most about Lightup Impact is that you truly do what you say. Expectations are clear, and you give opportunities to different organisations. We are part of shaping what Lightup Impact is all about", she said.

Operating in the same field, as the same type (nonprofit), and stage of organisation (early stage) as our members, we have a good understanding of their challenges and needs and the local customs and traditions that should be mitigated or navigated when communicating with them or our local audiences. Working closely with our members on the ground has been key to our understanding and learning how to communicate with them effectively. Moving our headquarters to Eldoret, Kenya, was critical in this regard, too. Now we can visit and form relationships with current and potential members, partners, and other relevant stakeholders in person.

In terms of technology, Lightup Impact has been quite good at learning and incorporating

Lightup Impact envisions a society where grassroots organisations are empowered and sustainable.



Panel discussion during Lightup Impact Days 2023

new comms tech. Like most for-profit companies, we make use of the latest available tools to communicate effectively and creatively. Social media has been a big asset to our organisation. It provides an easy, cost-effective way for us to stay in touch with the majority of our stakeholders. Other platforms, like our website, have been more challenging to learn since this requires specialised knowledge and time. Nonetheless, we have been able to put together an informative and engaging website, which is the best place for any newcomers to learn more about our organisation and members, purpose, programmes and activities, and impact.

Something that many might find interesting is that we communicate regularly and freely with our members over WhatsApp, a mobile chat application, where we can quickly share news, events, grant opportunities, and any other relevant information and celebrate each other's accomplishments.

When it comes to building and maintaining trust, we have to communicate frequently and in the right tone and stay up to date with the latest developments in the sustainability space, but also all the other areas within which we and our members operate. Though these activities are ever-evolving and require continuous efforts, we have managed to produce content quite regularly, making sure to prioritise communicating our impact and the impact of our members. We are quite transparent about how we operate, as can be seen in our annual-, event-, and financial reports, available for download from our website.¹⁰ On our blog,¹¹ you can find many different types of content, from sustainable development to our latest impact programs and member profiles. We aim to post at least once a month but typically post more frequently to ensure that we provide longer-form communications to our audiences that cover topics more comprehensively and facilitate building trust.

Building and maintaining relationships is much more challenging and requires a greater investment of time. We care about what our partners and community think and often engage with them to gain a better understanding. For this purpose, we use email, chat, video calls (such as our community meetups and online public events), in-person events or meetings (Lightup Impact Days conference), on-site visits (especially our members), surveys, and focus group discussions. Through these approaches, we not only collect feedback but conduct needs assessments to design effective data-driven and human-centred interventions. But gathering data and feedback is not enough; we must listen and empathise with what our members have to say and develop and implement the necessary changes to our approach where and as needed.

In terms of our tone of voice, we want our messages to be as accessible as possible. We write for all readers, using casual, inclusive, and simple language, incorporating our values and culture, and being as authentic, positive, and inspiring as possible.

Bearing fruits and planting new seeds

Regardless of limited resources, our organisation has grown beautifully since becoming fully operational in January 2022. In 2023, we onboarded 50 new grassroots organisations from Kenya, Rwanda, Uganda, and Tanzania (50% more than in 2022) – bringing our total to 125 members; hosted our 2nd annual Lightup Impact conference, gathering 154 participants (50% more than in 2022); and redesigned our website and blog, drawing more than 6,000 visitors to our pages. We also hosted two successful crowdfunding campaigns raising €22,000 for two important causes: our Founder Tour 2022 and Skills Development and Innovation for Impact Program.^{12,13} Last but not least, we doubled our

financial capacity between 2022 and 2023. Our impact in numbers can be seen in Figure 1 in the Sustainability spotlight below. Read more about our members' impact in our annual report for 2022.¹⁴

In the future, we want to continue to grow and increase our resources, including comms support, which is a crucial aspect of the sustainable development of grassroots organisations. We hope to host webinars and workshops and create a skills development programme to help our members build the necessary communication skills to help grow their organisations and create social change in their communities. In particular, we would like to offer our members the chance to learn or develop their skills in grant proposal writing, reporting writing, website creation, digital marketing, and online and visual content creation.

Disclaimers

The opinions expressed in this article are the author's own and not necessarily shared by his employer or EMWA.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Author information

Nicole Bezuidenhout has been a medical writer at TFS HealthScience since 2022, developing engaging scientific content for audiences across the pharma and biotech industries. She holds a PhD in General Medical and Services Sciences, specialising in oncology and cancer metabolism. She has been an EMWA member since 2020 and volunteers as the section editor for the Digital Communication section of Medical Writing and the content editor for Lightup Impact.

Connect with her on LinkedIn:

www.linkedin.com/in/njbezuidenhout



Valeria Santoro is a cancer research scientist and Ashoka Visionary Leader. She holds a PhD in oncology and advocates for equal opportunities in health and gender in underserved communities. Today she is the Founder & CEO of Lightup Impact, through which she empowers young grassroots leaders in gender, health and education in Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, and Tanzania to become sustainable and scale their impact.

Connect with her on LinkedIn:

www.linkedin.com/in/valeria-santoro



Jeniffer Muganda is the Strategic Partnership Manager at Lightup Impact and a passionate advocate for change. She strongly supports the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, firmly believing that we all have the power to create solutions for a better tomorrow. She is guided by mentorship and strives to empower the youth to shape a sustainable world.

Connect with her on LinkedIn:

www.linkedin.com/in/ohiwajeniffer

Sustainability spotlight:

Nicole Bezuidenhout

EMWA member and volunteer content editor at Lightup Impact

Medical Writing (MEW): Hi Nicole, thank you for taking the time to speak with us and share your experience as a volunteer with Lightup Impact. We'd like to start by asking if you could tell us a bit about how you came to be a volunteer for them.

Nicole Bezuidenhout (NB): I started volunteering at Lightup Impact in 2021, shortly after supporting a fundraiser hosted by another incredible

nonprofit called Together Women Can; they empower women and fight cervical cancer in Kenya (www.togetherwomencan.co). To make a long story short, the co-founder of Together Women Can, Dr Valeria Santoro, had recently founded Lightup Impact, a "movement of over 125 young grassroots leaders across East Africa, advocating equality in health, gender, and opportunities, as described on their website lightupimpact.com. Dr Santoro was looking for

volunteers to support its growth. Longing to do more outreach work in the areas of gender equality and women's health – two issues very close to my heart – I reached out to offer my support in communications. The fact that our community of changemakers is also addressing several of the United Nations Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) was a huge bonus. In all honesty, I didn't know much about sustainable development or the SDGs when I



Figure 1. Lightup Impact by the numbers

first started and naively thought (I suppose, like most) that the focus was solely on the environment and climate; the learning curve was, and continues to be, steep. Now, I can confidently say that I'm not only aware but also 100% behind the "universal call to action to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone everywhere".

MEW: Can you tell us some more about your role as content editor and the types of communications you are involved in producing? And can you speak to the transferability of skills between your day job as a medical writer and your volunteer work, and vice versa?

NB: When I joined Lightup Impact, I committed to writing one or two blog posts per year featuring topical issues and focusing on my area of expertise: health and well-being. However, as time went by and the organisation and community continued growing, both parties realised that there was a need for additional communication support. After the small glimpse into the impactful work of Lightup Impact and our members and my interactions with our amazing team, I desperately wanted to become more involved and fill that need to help the organisation grow by leveraging my experience and skills as a medical writer.

Today, my role has evolved into something much more involved, where I develop content for several of Lightup Impact's platforms, including

our blog, website, and email communication. I also write and edit annual- and post-event reports and develop communication and content strategies. Although certain aspects of my job as a medical writer are not needed in my work for Lightup Impact (i.e., knowledge of scientific/medical information and regulatory guidelines), my writing and editing skills, attention to detail, ability to create and follow guidelines, and understanding of different communication platforms and digital marketing strategies, have been quite helpful in creating harmonised, well-written, engaging communications for the Lightup Impact audiences. Additionally, as a small team of five, supporting over 100 organisations, each member of our team is responsible for their own tasks and readily attempts any job that needs doing. Every deadline is a tight one, and so we all have to be well-

Naturally, some aspects of working with Lightup Impact have been somewhat challenging and unusual compared to my day job.

organised and proactive, have good time management and planning skills, and be comfortable with quickly learning new areas and competencies to get the job done. Valeria has done a great job of selecting a team that functions well together, fostering a culture of learning and knowledge sharing – a common practice and core value of our Lightup Impact community. In this way, I've been able to fortify existing skills while continuously expanding my capabilities as a communications professional.

Naturally, some aspects of working with Lightup Impact have been somewhat challenging and unusual compared to my day job. Not only is

the subject matter different, but so is the audience, the style of writing, the tools we use, and the work environment. Due to limited time and working outside of normal business hours and so far away from our community, I sadly haven't had as much time as I would've liked to properly connect with our team or community. Nevertheless, I've had a pretty unique opportunity to gather new experiences and skills that I'm able to apply in my medical writing tasks. For example, we use many different digital tools to communicate and collaborate with each other, our members, and our broader audience. So far, I've had the chance to learn and confidently use at least five new digital tools/platforms and expand my

capabilities using tools I was somewhat familiar with but never really had a chance to dive into. These include tools for project management (Asana), content management (WordPress), and graphic design (Canva). Compared to my daily work as a medical writer, I get to be much more creative, designing web pages, creating visual assets, developing content for different communication platforms, and working on completely different types of documents. Recently, in my job as a medical writer, I got the opportunity to quickly create a newsletter for a client (that was very well received) and assist our marketing department with writing and editing content pieces, press releases, business reference sheets, and creating visual assets, all of which were made easier by the experience I've gained working for Lightup Impact.

Through interactions with my Lightup Impact team and our community, I've also been able to develop my soft skills, including key leadership qualities like communication, decision-making, delegation, empathy, integrity, and humility, which will no doubt help me progress in my career as a medical writer. For that, I'm grateful to our Lightup Impact team and community, who beautifully demonstrate these qualities.

MEW: In speaking with others involved in sustainability endeavours, it seems that a common challenge that they encounter is overcoming resistance in others. Have you encountered "resistance"? If so, in what form, and can you share how you overcame this resistance? Can you share a "success story" with us?

NB: Resistance to sustainability endeavours is multifaceted. Some people don't understand what sustainable development is, and when they do, perhaps don't view it as a necessity in their here and now or even something that will affect them eventually. A lack of resources is another major block to being able to participate in sustainability activities.

In a nutshell, sustainable development is described as fulfilling the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations, all the while ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental care, and social well-being is maintained.

Members in our community are grassroots organisations, meaning these organisations are initiated and driven by locals to create and sustain social or political change to improve the lives of people in their communities – they are incredibly motivated. In the regions where our members are active, adopting sustainable development strategies can be exceptionally challenging, but for many, resistance is not a path they can afford to take. However, that doesn't mean resistance doesn't come into play. For community-based organisations, there are several key factors opposing social change and the sustainability movement. A lack of integration into national and regional development policies, a lack of support networks, and a lack of visibility and credibility to secure funding represent some of the main impediments to the growth and sustainability of grassroots organisations.

In general, most of the organisations we work with are aware that integrating sustainable development strategies into their development plans is critical to ensuring their long-term success. However, a lack of resources and know-how creates an inherent resistance to implementing these strategies. That's where Lightup Impact can offer support, and our members have demonstrated an extreme willingness to learn, grow, and embrace sustainable strategies.

It's difficult to single out one success story because all of our members are doing incredible work, from empowering women to become independent and run their own businesses, to providing critical menstrual healthcare and education to young girls, and giving the youth opportunities to further their education and uplift themselves from the social issues affecting them. You can read more about our amazing members on our blog (www.lightupimpact.com/blog).

For community-based organisations, there are several key factors opposing social change and the sustainability movement.

MEW: The work you have been doing through Lightup Impact is clearly needed and changing many lives for the better. Would you like to share some last thoughts on what the rewards have been for you as a volunteer and tell us how others can get involved if interested?

NB: It's been an absolute pleasure working with the Lightup Impact team. They have given me so much

freedom to explore how involved I want to be, supporting my learning of this field and the development of my skills every step of the way. I'm grateful and feel very privileged to be able to use my expertise to communicate about the wonderful work of our community of change-makers. When I look at the tremendous impact they are creating and all the work they are putting into improving the lives of others, it's absolutely inspiring and motivates me to keep going. I'm having so much fun working with Lightup Impact, so much so that even when things feel crazy and stressful, it still doesn't really feel like work. That's a pretty special feeling.

As a young organisation, Lightup Impact welcomes external support to build our own capacity and deliver the critical resources needed to empower grassroots organisations. We're always very happy when anyone with a suitable skillset or relevant experience is willing to volunteer. We've had volunteers from many different fields support us, from legal to graphic design. In the realm of communications, I can say that many nonprofits or grassroots can benefit



from support in website or graphic design, proposal or grant writing, and communication strategy development, or generally developing skills in writing and editing to support fundraising and overall communications activities. If anyone from the EMWA community would like to get involved, e.g., help create a relevant skills development programme or host a webinar, we'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch with me at nicole.bezuidenhout@lightupimpact.com or Lightup Impact (contactus@lightupimpact.com).

Additionally, we have recently launched our new monthly giving program to scale our initiatives and ensure our long-term success and that of our members – support in this regard is always welcome. With these funds, we will finance our operating costs, make possible our annual Lightup Impact Days conference, and expand our Skills Development and Innovation for Impact Program and locally-led founder meetups. Read more about it in our blog post (www.lightupimpact.com/our-new-giving-program-be-part-of-creating-sustainable-social-change) and on our donation page (www.lightupimpact.com/donate-to-lightup-impact).

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