

Small Charity Beats Oil Giant, Becomes Largest Seller of Solar Lights in Africa

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Solar lights save lives in Africa. They improve school performance. They reduce respiratory diseases. And they provide a scalable model for micro-enterprises and economic stimulus.

But who's the biggest seller of solar electric lights on the continent? Until recently, perhaps surprisingly, it was the French oil giant Total—which was selling portable lights through its gas station forecourts and other channels. That leadership position has now been overtaken by TreeHugger regulars Solar-Aid. In a blogpost over at Sunshine Is Free, Solar Aid CEO reveals how a tiny, recently launched charity has become the biggest seller of solar lights in Africa:

At SolarAid and SunnyMoney, we have huge respect for the work Total are doing – and will do all that we can to encourage and support it – but it's hard not to be a bit competitive! So we smiled when we learnt that they have sold 111,000 solar lights in the last three years. Here are our latest figures:

- Sold in the last three years: 203,000
- Sold in the last seven months: 137,500

– Sold in October 2012: 35,000

We believe this makes us the biggest last mile seller of solar lights in Africa; probably by a big margin if you look at our current run rate.

This isn't just a story about how small social enterprises can have a massive global impact. It's also pretty neat to note that fossil fuel giants are getting in on the action too, and not – we suspect – just to boost their corporate image. Solar power offers huge opportunities in the emerging markets of poor countries. It's neat to see how different players are jockeying to meet that demand.
