

GIVING

Gifts, Grants, and Good Works



In Sierra Leone, one of the countries the charity Humanity United is focusing on, children are often forced into jobs that require hard physical labor and pay little or no salary.

From the Shadows

Wife of Ebay's founder shines spotlight on global human rights

By Caroline Preston

AS THE FOUNDER of eBay and someone who has sought to shake up traditional philanthropy, Pierre Omidyar tends to draw more news-media attention than his wife.

But over the last few years, Pam Omidyar has quietly built a grant-making organization apart from her husband's that is poised to become a major player in the fight against two global problems that rarely rank high on donors' priority lists: mass violence and modern-day slavery.

Ms. Omidyar, a biologist by training who says her interest in human-rights issues grew out of reading she did following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, resolved in 2005 to spend \$100-million over five years to eradicate those twin problems. In July, she officially established Humanity United, the grant-making organization she has slowly carved out from her family's Omidyar Network.

Ms. Omidyar describes mass violence, such as genocide, and human trafficking—forcing people to serve without pay as laborers, domestic servants, and sex slaves—as “the two worst things that man does to man.”

“I can’t stop a tsunami, and I can’t stop a hurricane, but I’d like to think that human beings have the power to stop treating each other so badly, so horrifically,” she says.

Humanity United, a 10-person operation that is lo-

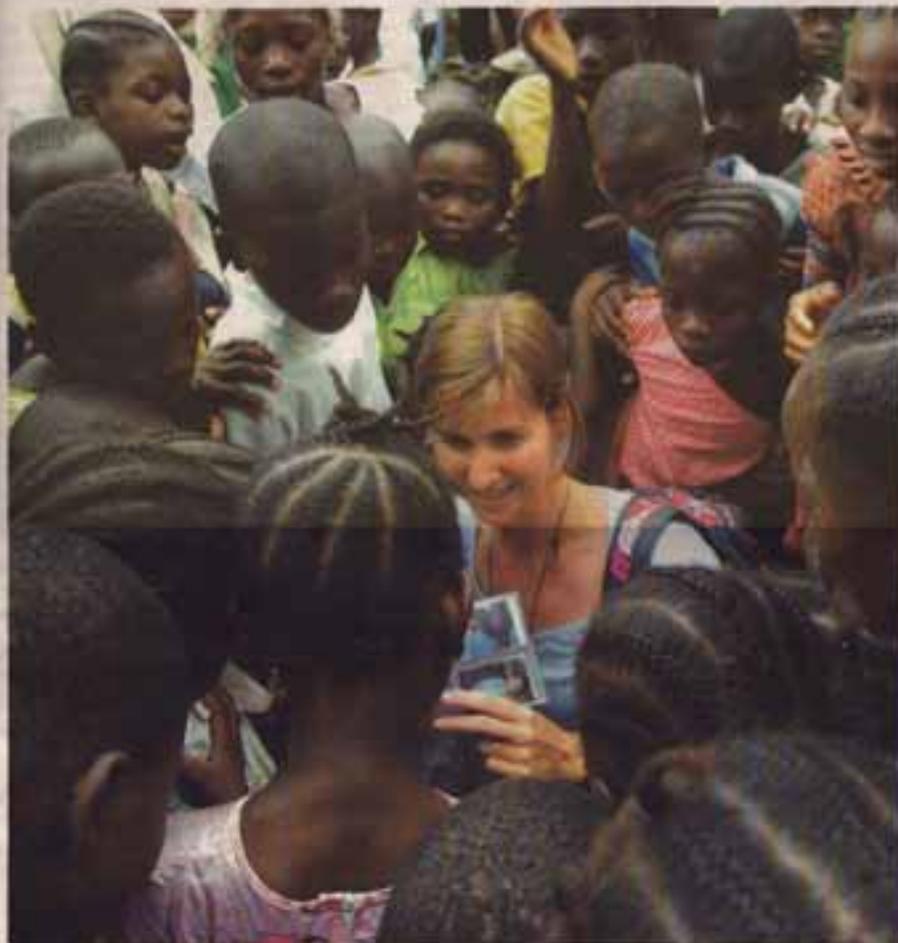
cated in the same building as the Omidyar Network, in Redwood City, Calif., has already become one of the biggest private donors focused on international human-rights causes. Its donations of \$20-million per year, which Ms. Omidyar says will continue well beyond 2010, make it a smaller philanthropy than the Omidyar Network, but not by much. The Omidyar Network gave \$33-million last year and plans to donate \$55-million in 2008.

Humanity United's philosophy of grant making, meanwhile, shares some similarities with the Omidyar Network's. The Omidyars make loans, not just grants, and support socially driven businesses along with charities. Ms. Omidyar's group is similarly flexible. It has two arms, one with charity status and another that is an advocacy group so it can avoid restrictions on partisan politics.

Like the Omidyar Network, Humanity United is a lean operation without an endowment, based on a belief that it is better to build grantees' organizations than one's own. It has also begun to develop a rigorous approach to determining the impact of its giving, and it tends to support new, and sometimes youth-led, charities.

Multiple Approaches

Humanity United's overarching approach to fighting genocide and slavery is to support scholars, policy



Pam Omidyar—whose philanthropic efforts include projects with her husband, the eBay founder **Pierre Omidyar**—created Humanity United to fight violence and slavery in countries like Liberia.

experts, and grass-roots activists, and to encourage them to work together.

Randy Newsomb, the group's president and a former official at the Omidyar Network, says that as he and Ms. Omidyar began to learn about genocide and slavery, they were struck by how policy, advocacy, and research each played a role in fighting those problems. But people working on each approach to preventing the two tragic actions haven't always cooperated, and foundations have tended to focus on one of the three approaches.

"The grass-roots and activist communities sometimes have suspicion for the more elite foreign-policy community, and equally some of the well-meaning foreign-policy experts have disdain for activists. It creates this lack of communication," says Mr. Newsomb, who led a community organization in San Francisco for 14 years before he started advising the Omidyars on their philanthropy.

Humanity United generally provides operating support, based on a belief that unrestricted money is the best way to help charities grow and advance their goals. The group tends to support younger charities, and has hired consultants to help the groups expand and to evaluate their work. Humanity United's leaders also sometimes introduce grantees to other donors.

Ms. Omidyar discovered many of the charities that

Humanity United supports as she was educating herself on the issues of slavery and genocide.

One of the first projects to catch her eye was a group called the Genocide Intervention Network, which she first contacted in March 2005, when it was a handful of college students trying to mobilize their peers against the fighting in Darfur. Today, the charity has a budget of \$2.2 million and 17 full-time employees.

"Mark Hanis and I joke that I was writing personal checks for their phone bill, their pizza, whatever they needed," says Ms. Omidyar, referring to the group's executive director. "But when you see the passion of youth, their energy, it becomes a question of how can you not support them and help them develop?"

Active Role

While the soft-spoken Ms. Omidyar prefers to stay out of the spotlight, she has met with legislators about divesting from Sudan and actively encourages other donors to get involved. Mr. Hanis says she contacts him often with questions about how to mobilize students in her home state of Hawaii, for example, or whether a no-fly zone over Darfur would be sound policy. He says she has helped to organize events, including one last year in Los Angeles where, while holding her baby in a carrier slung around her neck, she helped set up a model refugee camp to raise awareness about the Darfur conflict.

"How often do you find donors who are willing to get involved down to the logistics of plastic tarp, while they are carrying a baby?" says Mr. Hanis. "That's her level of commitment."

Ms. Omidyar says her interest in human-rights advocacy developed gradually. It was not something she explored in any depth as a college student in the late 1990s, nor was she an activist for other causes.

"I was focused on being a scientist, and I was working full time to pay for my college tuition, so I'm not sure that left a lot of time," she says.

"I also tend to err on the shy side," she says, "but I think as Pierre and I were discovering our own personal power as philanthropists, and these two causes emerged for me, you do increasingly find your voice."

'Action Group'

As Humanity United has developed its own identity separate from that of the Omidyar Network, its leaders have tailored grant making to focus initially on a few key areas. In its work to end mass atrocities, the group has zeroed in on Sudan and Liberia, and on international organizations such as the International Criminal Court.

In its support of groups that are trying to stop human trafficking, Humanity United has put much of its resources into bringing together grantees to create an "action group" to rally lawmakers on the issue.

With each of these efforts, Humanity United has recorded successes but also run up against significant challenges, often stemming from its newness and the complexities of the issues it seeks to advance.

Humanity United started giving in Liberia with the idea that it could make a difference on its own, an idea that Ms. Omidyar now says was naive. So at this year's Clinton Global Initiative, the former president's annual gathering on philanthropy, her organization helped broker an agreement with other donors and the Liberian government to improve coordination and persuade others to support existing projects.

But working with other philanthropists, and identifying projects that will make the most difference, continue to be major challenges, as many charities have flooded into Liberia following the end of its civil war in 2003 and the election of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. Sidi M. Diawara, a program officer with TrustAfrica, a charity that works with Humanity United to strengthen Liberian nonprofit groups, praises the grant maker for its commitment to facilitating giving but says more work needs to be done.

"Donor collaboration remains a major challenge," he says. "The situation would look better, could look better, if Humanity United and others could meet in Liberia and come up with comprehensive programs." He says meetings of donors typically take place in the United States and exclude local voices. (Humanity United's leaders, meanwhile, say they agree and have been in touch with some donors about the possibility of holding a meeting in Liberia.)

'Thinking It Through'

On the slavery issue, Humanity United's leaders have found that there are not many charities working on the problem, though the number has grown in the last few years. Humanity United has focused on bringing those groups together and helping to collect and organize data on the phenomenon of modern-day slavery.

Kevin Bates, president of the nonprofit group Free the Slaves and author of several books on human trafficking, says Humanity United's decision not only to support groups that provide assistance to victims of slavery, but also to take a comprehensive approach to remedying the conditions that allow slavery to exist, has been refreshing.

"They didn't leap in and just say, 'There's a slave child. Let's help them.' They said, 'This is a big problem, and let's spend time thinking it through,'" says

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Humanity United Strives to Bring Together Diverse Group of Activists

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Mr. Bales. "You can't solve a problem unless you understand it."

Humanity United's efforts to organize some of its grantees, including Mr. Bales's organization, into a group that would actively seek to influence policy was one of its signature efforts this past year. Working with the Sheridan Group, a consulting group in Washington, Humanity United's grantees learned about advocacy and pressed the House of Representatives to ensue legislation on the slavery issue.

But the group of grantees produced some tension, due primarily to rifts among antislavery organizations over whether to emphasize sex trafficking or labor trafficking, to focus on Americans or those born overseas, and whether to try to criminalize prostitution. Ultimately, the group decided not to take a stance on some of the legislation's more contentious points.

Mr. Newcomb, of Humanity United, says encouraging grantees to come to an agreement was more difficult than he had expected but that cooperation remains critical to the success of the antislavery movement. "I don't think we'll make any progress unless these organizations work together," he says.

Tarek Risk, director of in-

teractive services at the Aspen Institute, which has helped Humanity United evaluate its work, says the organization's advocacy efforts might be more effective if it had a larger staff, with more employees in Washington. Right now, Humanity United has one staff member in the capital.

But Mr. Newcomb insists that it is preferable to put money into building the organizations it supports, rather than the grant-making organization. He says that the lines between grant maker and grantee today are increasingly blurry, like the lines between consumers and companies, and that the exper-

tise generally lies with grantees.

"It's all about empowering the right leaders at the right time," says Mr. Newcomb. "We're at the corner of Broadway and Main Street in Redwood City, and we like to say that the view of the world is radically different from Broadway and Main than what it looks like at the Mamba Point Hotel in Monrovia, or at the Juba Grand in southern Sudan."

While Humanity United has no plans to retol its grant making because a new president will soon be in office, the issue of genocide and mass atrocities, at least, might be elevated

during the Obama administration.

Several of the group's grantees—including Samantha Power, the Harvard scholar and genocide expert; Gayle Smith, co-chair of the Enough Project, a Washington group that seeks to end genocide; and Sarah Sewall, another Harvard researcher—are advising President-elect Barack Obama on his transition.

Mr. Obama's pick for U.N. ambassador, Susan E. Rice, has been an outspoken advocate of a more-aggressive approach to ending the conflict in Darfur.

Meanwhile, the organization expects to retain its level of giv-

ing, despite the economic collapse, although its leaders say they are being mindful of the stock-market volatility.

Ms. Omidyar has said she may consider giving more than \$20-million per year if she believes it would make a big difference.

Different Views

For Ms. Omidyar, ending slavery and genocidal violence represents a key starting point for improving lives in entire countries and societies. But she says she understands why other donors have chosen different causes where they think their money will accomplish the most.

"We strongly believe that ending conflict and slavery will allow schools to get better, will allow economic development to take place. If you end conflict, then schools aren't being bombed," she says. "But Bill Gates makes a very compelling argument that if you tackle health care first, then you can improve the health of people, and then whole economies and countries."

"That tells us that we're in our space and they're in theirs," she says. "It would be great if everyone is working effectively, and we're building these platforms simultaneously, and together we can lift up the world."

A Sampling of Humanity United's Recent Grants

Enough Project (Washington): \$1.5-million to help the organization rally people around the world to fight genocide and mass atrocities and put pressure on policy makers to adopt measures to fight those problems.

Free the Slaves (Washington): \$1.29-million to support its efforts to free people from slavery, help them rebuild their lives, and develop a comprehensive plan to end slavery.

International Justice Mission (Washington): \$405,000 for research on forced labor and commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Invisible Children (Spring Valley, Calif.): \$570,000 for planning and program sup-

port, and for a documentary film. Started by three young filmmakers, this group seeks to improve the lives of children affected by war in northern Uganda, and to raise awareness of their plight in the United States.

Senior Executive Service of Liberia (Monrovia): \$1-million for this effort to attract talented public officials to serve in Liberia's government and to advance policies that will help the country continue to recover from years of civil war.

Sisterhood for Peace (Boston): \$925,000 to build a network of Sudanese and African-American women who can work together to foster peace in Sudan.