

Addressing social inequality amongst some of the world's poorest people.

"It now takes just a day and a half to process several thousand donations – that's pretty good!" – Paul Powell.



With projects across India and neighbouring countries, The Karuna Trust takes a community-based approach to combat the caste prejudice that remains firmly entrenched within South Asian society.

"India in fact has an incredibly progressive constitution," explains Paul Powell at the charity. "For example, it promises education for all. But caste is a rigid identity view that has been embedded for thousands of years. The family that you are born into determines your life opportunities and your profession – if we can call it that. There are castes whose role is to collect 'night soil' [human excrement] – that is their lot, and it will be their children's lot. In many villages, low castes are forbidden to drink from the village well – they have to beg for water."

Working out of small London offices, Karuna (the name is a Sanskrit word meaning 'compassionate action based on wisdom') raises money to support local initiatives that address these inequalities. "It is an educational task," says Paul, "and a very long-term approach."

As IT Manager at the charity, one of Paul's roles is to co-ordinate the efficient processing of supporter donations. As ever, success brings its own challenges, and the charity now receives around 7000 donations per month via standing orders, several hundred via direct debit, plus hundreds more via other means. All these must be matched with individual donor records to claim Gift Aid.

"The major contribution of IT is to bring down the admin workload. We couldn't do what we do otherwise," comments Paul. "It also allows us to understand our donor base – to let us target more efficiently."

CTX has recently provided donations of server software from Microsoft, to bring a much-needed upgrade to the system.

"We've brought our database up to date, and can now do much more in terms of interrogating it. Now, I can get a donation file from the bank, generate a spreadsheet and immediately send it to the Revenue for Gift Aid. It now takes just a day and a half each month to process several thousand donations – that's pretty good!"

"The CTX donation chipped an incredible amount off what we'd have paid," he continues. "We've been able to spend that money on hardware – we now have a proper server that's appropriate for the task."

Karuna also received donations of MS Office Professional Plus 2007 – and Paul makes an interesting observation about the availability of this to charities. "We were using an earlier version, and to be honest it would have been difficult to justify a business case for purchasing upgrades to 2007," he admits. "However, whilst I'm very computer literate, we do have a number of staff who are less comfortable with IT – I imagine that this is the case across the charity sector. And what we've found is that Office 2007 lets people do things much more intuitively, including some hugely powerful functionality. This helps us a lot."

Keeping down those hidden 'costs per donation' is crucial for any charity, and Karuna is clearly canny when it comes to using IT to maximise income from its supporters. Paul reports the CTX ordering process as 'straightforward' and describes himself as 'very satisfied' with the scheme. So as the charity further expands and updates, they'll be back for more? "Definitely!" he replies.

Who are they?
KARUNA.

Where are they?
Based in London.

What do they do?
Address social discrimination via projects across South Asia.

How big are they?
14 staff; around £1.6m raised last year.

What did they receive?
Microsoft Windows and SQL Servers, with Windows Server Device CALs and 30x Office Professional Plus 2007.

The outcome?
The impact of each individual supporter's donation is maximised by the efficient use of IT.

www.karuna.org