



LEILA JANAH

► FOUNDER AND CEO, SAMASOURCE AND LXMI

As Leila Janah observes, “You can teach a man to fish, but if he’s living in a desert, there’s no point.” To irrigate that desert, she’s founded two social enterprises. One is Samasource, which provides digital work for clients such as TripAdvisor and Microsoft to low-income people in Kenya, Uganda and India. The other is LXMI (pronounced “LUX-me”), a line of fair-trade skin-care products made from a rare type of shea butter derived from the nuts of Ugandan nilotica trees. LXMI works through nonprofit collectives to ensure that the women who harvest the nuts earn a living wage—at least three times the local norm. Profits are put back into the companies so that they can expand. **BY GENE REBECK**

SKY: How does Samasource work?

JANAH: We identify people who have the will to work and who have some basic skills—they have to be able to read and write English. We also identify contracts from large, mostly technology enterprises and manage the training... that people need to do work for these companies. To date, we’ve moved about 36,000 people out of poverty, increasing household income on average from \$2 a day to over \$8 a day. What’s remarkable about the model is that even three years after



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the workers have left the program, they continue to be living out of poverty because of the skills they've developed.

Samasource is based on a concept called "microwork." What is that?

Microwork is the idea that you can break down a large digital project into smaller units of work and train someone to do that small unit of work. For example, we work with some of the biggest artificial intelligence companies now, tagging images for them. This image tagging is part of how technologies like self-driving cars are being developed. As we tag these images, we're teaching these algorithms how to maneuver on a street or how to recognize a sign.

How does Samasource guarantee the quality of the work?

Rather than have the workers work directly with the companies, we do a lot of management to package the work into something that the companies are ready to use. And our technology platform allows us to resubmit projects until we get a result at the level of quality we want. One thing we've learned from this is that people from low-income backgrounds who get the chance to work are often so dedicated and so grateful for the chance that our attrition rates are shockingly low and people learn incredibly quickly. We don't have a lot of problems with introduced errors.

What about your skin-care company, LXMI, and its use of Ugandan nilotica?

Nilotica has these incredible hydrating properties. As I realized how effective it was, I also realized what a difference it could make in that local community if I could figure out how to export it. So I decided to build a Samasource-like company. I'm very excited about what this second company can do, both for the women [producers] who live in Uganda and for the trees, which now are no longer in danger of being cut down.