

Ten Dollars Can Change the World

The Satya Interview with Adam M. Roberts



Adam works to find suitable poverty alleviation projects across the globe. Photo: Stephanie Shain, The \$10 Club

Do you have \$10 burning in your wallet? Can you forfeit a trip to the movies or dining out once a month? What if we told you that \$10 could go towards poverty alleviation? Could you spare it then?

These are questions Adam M. Roberts, president of The \$10 Club, pondered after attending the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002. Individually, most of us are unable to afford to make a dramatic impact on the quality of life for people across the globe. But, if Roberts could convince a whole lot of people to part with *only* \$10 a month, by joining forces, he believes we could make a substantive, tangible, and remarkably positive difference.

Roberts' day job, working with wildlife animal protection organization Born Free USA, inspired him to unite his work doing conservation, rescue and protection of

animals with what was needed for humans. What began with a letter to some close friends asking them to take a leap of faith and pledge \$10 has now expanded into hundreds and the start of The \$10 Club. Today, The \$10 Club helps finance projects in over 40 countries around the world. And their hopes for the new year: achieving their 50th project and doubling their membership.

Maureen C. Wyse was able to break Adam M. Roberts away from work to discuss just how he plans on saving the world \$10 at a time.

How do you choose which countries and which needs?

To be honest, it's all based on painstaking research, and occasionally by way of contacts I made through my full-time job in wildlife conservation. Each month, I sit down with the United Nations human development index, which ranks nations from one to 177 in terms of poverty, levels of education, access to sanitation and safe drinking water, health care, per capita income and all the rest. I start from the bottom with the poorest and work my way up. At the same time, I look at the types of projects we've done in the past few months to see what area is due for our attention.

So every time we see a kid in Belize going to the community garden in their school and picking lettuce they planted with our grant, then we know that somebody's eating. And kids with blankets and shoes and medicine who live on subway platforms in India. Those kids are warm at night because someone was able to give me 10 bucks this month.

How do you tackle such a daunting list of projects, that includes "increasing educational opportunities, women's empowerment, water and sanitation availability, health access, delivery of alternative energy, organic agriculture tools and food distribution, and biodiversity conservation across the globe?"

It's not easy. We like to fund projects in full and are therefore limited by the amount of money we have. We don't want to put \$3,500 toward a \$100,000 building; we want to be able to say we built these schoolrooms, we provided this hospital equipment, we fed or clothed or housed this many people. We want that sense of tangible accomplishment. Sometimes it's a hindrance because there are worthwhile projects well outside our means. At the same time, we want to confront directly as many problems as we can. It takes a lot of work to find the right ones, but once we do, it's always rewarding.

Tell us about attending the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa. How did it spur your organization?

I was there in 2002 professionally for animal welfare work, to make sure the decisions made did not hurt biodiversity protection or increase intensive farming in developing countries as a means to get out of poverty. There I became increasingly distressed by the lack of government commitment toward poverty alleviation. There was a lot of talk but very little being done. Well-developed, wealthy countries were so influenced by large corporations that in many cases they were unwilling to donate appropriately, or commit to legal or regulatory changes. It just became more and more frustrating. So I started to think, if the governments aren't making the commitment, then maybe we need to think outside the box, to see what someone like myself, with limited means, working for a nonprofit organization could do



Street kids in India now have blankets and medicines thanks to The \$10 Club. Photo: Adam M. Roberts

to positively affect the life of some poor person somewhere in the world. Then I realized that if I could find a vehicle to make a difference to one person, what if I could get 100 people to join me? Little by little, exponentially, our collective impact would increase.

By coming together, we can make a measurable impact. There may actually come a day we would have as much influence as a corporation, a foundation, or a government itself. I can't do it on my own. But if I can get people to join me...someday we'll go from buying books and uniforms to building schools; from buying medicines to building hospitals. The potential is endless.

Ten dollars, why not more?

The answer is not necessarily to ask people to sacrifice so much that it hurts, but just to make a sacrifice. When the end of the month comes, after I've paid all my bills, and my family and I have gone out to dinner or to the movies, and I have put money away for college funds and retirement, and bought the kids new clothes and lived a normal and full life, could I still spare

\$10? Would having \$10 less affect me in any measurable way? No. But that same \$10 could save someone's life.

I started talking to people while I was at the World Summit, people who did good work for non-governmental organizations providing medicines to street kids who were living in the poorest parts of Johannesburg. I asked them what they would do if someone offered them \$1,000. And they told me about buying first aid kits for all of their shelters. I talked to somebody who made and sold solar cookers, to allow the cooking of food without women having to go long distances to cut down firewood and haul it back to the community. I thought, how many solar cookers could we buy with \$1,000? I started to see that if The \$10 Club could get off the ground, there were definitely people who would benefit from our work.

But the key was getting money to people on the ground, people actually doing the work. So often, aid goes to governments or large organizations or places where it doesn't always get to those most in need. The beauty of The \$10 Club is that every membership dollar

that comes in goes back out. Not a penny of it goes to my operation, my overhead. I don't take a salary of any kind. When all is said and done, we're finishing our fourth year, and we've done 48 projects in more than 40 countries—about \$100,000 worth of assistance.

You started a goal in 2002 to reach 100,000 members in a decade to fund a million dollar project each month. How close are you to reaching your goal?

We are far, far away, but we've had really good growth. In the first year we did about \$10,000 worth of projects, the second year \$20,000, in the third year \$27,000, and this year we're at about \$38,000. So each year we are increasing rather significantly. One goal is for each member to find one new member each year, so we could double membership every year. Then in 10 or 11 years we could essentially have 100,000 members and be able to do one million dollars in grants each month. Outreach is essential to our expansion.

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I've come to realize that there are millions of people all over the world who are simply forgotten, who aren't being attended to by NGOs or foundations or their own governments. I don't want to let those people go unnoticed; I don't want to turn a blind eye to them, simply because my chosen professional path is to help animals.

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The \$10 Club helped bring safe drinking water to a village in Nicaragua by funding a new water well. Photo: Adam M. Roberts

How are you reaching out to get new members?

I've found the best way to get new members is for people who are familiar with the project to spread the word, to get people to take the time to look at the website and sit back and say, these things are really happening. Look at the face of a child going to school in the Democratic Republic of Congo; a child in the Ukraine has boots to get through the winter; or somebody in India with leprosy who now has a roof over his head. And you can look at those people and say, at the end of the day, that only costs \$10. It's so cheap. It's two lattes or one compact disc per month. It's a really reasonable price to pay. And it is all because we're collectively buying into the same project.

You use these simple monetary equations like buying lattes and CDs and other expenses. How do people respond?

I think favorably. I just gave a talk in Washington—there were grins around the room because people don't think about what they spend money on. The last thing I want to do is to have anyone feel guilty about living their lives. For me, it's about saying, you can live a high quality life,

but if you can spare that little bit, and do it in such a creative and progressive way that it's maximized, then you should. I'm not saying, don't ever stop for coffee; just think about how much you spend on it. Ask yourself if over the next 30 days, instead of buying eight coffees, you can get six and use the savings from the other two to save somebody's life. If you answer that question positively, I hope you will join me. If not, enjoy your latte. It's absolutely up to you.

When it comes to the question of solving global poverty issues for \$10 a month, it's not whether we can afford to do it—it's whether we can afford not to.

Describe some of your favorite success stories with the poverty alleviation projects.

This question is always so hard for no other reason than each one is meaningful. The people who do these projects often have nowhere to go. The big foundations have cumbersome project applications. Somebody trying to build latrines in Bangladesh, they don't know how to go to a foundation in the U.S. to get money. So it's rewarding to have this in our control, to help somebody

who otherwise may completely go without life's necessities.

The leprosy project was pretty moving for me personally. I don't think anyone in this country even thinks about leprosy. India has three-fourths of the global cases of leprosy every year and we're completely blind to it. People with leprosy not only have to suffer the debilitating effects of the disease, but they're also shunned from their own communities. Their neighbors lash out at them and they're completely on their own. This one guy, all he wanted to do was get enough money to put bricks together to give people a place to call home. That one really touched me.

But perhaps the one that touched me the most was an education project in Thailand. I was there for business and met a guy, Father Joe, who runs a place called the Mercy Center for kids, many of whom were products of the sex trade. Men from Bangkok go to rural communities, talk to fathers and give them a small amount of money for their child, promising to give them a job in the city—working in a restaurant, for example. But instead they get pulled into the sex trade. It is absolutely awful and the stories Father Joe told were heartbreaking. He has dedicated his whole adult life to helping these kids, and setting up an emergency center. He has kids with AIDS and other horrible diseases and he smiles at every one of them, and knows everyone by name. I thought for sure he was going to want money for AIDS medicine or food or beds. But he told me if he had the money, he would like to start a teen literacy project and provide each one of those kids with a uniform and a backpack filled with school supplies. He could only do so much for so long and at some point, the kids were going to get old enough to be out on their own and he didn't want them to go back to the life they came from. He wanted to give them a new opportunity and a sense of self-worth. So I gave him the money and about a year later I got an email with pictures of the kids, who now have vocational skills and are learning to read and write. For those kids, there's a real chance that simply didn't exist before.

So you work for wildlife during the day with Born Free USA, The \$10 Club

in your free time; how do you reconcile animal rights and social justice?

I don't think it's difficult at all. I am an animal advocate because I consider myself a compassionate person. But that compassion doesn't stop with animals. It extends to the homeless and the hungry, people who are suffering. My goal is to make a difference. For the past 15 years, my professional endeavor has been to make a difference for animals, in part because it seems that animals are underserved in America and across the globe. But I've come to realize that there are millions of people all over the world who are simply forgotten, who aren't being attended to by NGOs or foundations or their own governments. I don't want to let those people go unnoticed; I don't want to turn a blind eye to them, simply because my chosen professional path is to help animals.

I think if you ask most animal advocates if they care about people and have a general sense of compassion, they do. Unfortunately, if you ask most people who work on social justice issues if they also care about animals, you're not going to get the same rate of response, so that makes me a little sad. Many of my animal protection colleagues have joined The \$10 Club. Animal exploiters so often claim that we don't care about people—this gives us all a perfect example of how wrong that claim is! I just really want to help wherever I can. And it's all based in a sense of compassion.

Anything else you would like to add?

If people are interested in what we do, they might want to look at the Millennium Development Goals that the UN has set for the year 2015. With each month's project we, as a small committed group of people, are addressing these UN goals. But perhaps most importantly, we're assuring that our aid gets directly to the people on the ground who are suffering.

There's a great book, called *The Hungry Man*, which suggests that when some people set out to do development projects, they get overly mired in the complexities of consultancies and environmental assessments and reconnaissance missions and community planning. At the end of the day, millions of dollars may have been spent to assess a problem that everyone on the ground knows exists and nothing has been done to help those in need. With The \$10 Club we go in with the assumption that the people who are pitching the projects have already done that work, [they know] what their people need the most. And we can jump right in and help them directly.

I don't want anyone to forget that these are human beings, not just numbers, not just statistics. These are children, grandmothers, widows, people in desperate need of help and we're able to help them and it's hugely rewarding every month. People tell me that when they read the monthly project reports and see the project updates they cry and then they smile. They cry about the misery to which they've been exposed and were otherwise unaware; and then they smile at the fact that they've done something very tangible to alleviate that suffering. For me too, every month when I write the report to our members, I go through the pain of thinking about these individuals in need; and then I am always so hugely satisfied at what we've done. It's really incomprehensible. When we join together we can do a world of good. ■

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