

Development Alternatives — The World's First Social Enterprise for Sustainable Development

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In 1983, Ashok Khosla — physicist, Harvard-trained, former UNEP director — founded Development Alternatives in New Delhi on a premise that was radical at the time and remains under-practiced today: that sustainable development requires not just policies and programmes but technologies, enterprises, and institutions that make it economically rational for poor people to live sustainably.

The insight was specific. If sustainable agriculture is more expensive than chemical agriculture for a smallholder farmer, the farmer will use chemicals. If sustainable building materials cost more than cement, builders will use cement. Exhortation, awareness campaigns, and donor-funded programmes cannot change this. What changes it is when sustainable options become the cheaper, more accessible, and more reliable choice — because someone has done the hard work of developing, testing, manufacturing, and distributing them at appropriate scale.

This is what Development Alternatives has spent forty-two years doing. It is described as the world's first social enterprise dedicated to sustainable development. The description is accurate.

Who They Are

Development Alternatives (DA) is a research and action organisation based in New Delhi, founded in 1983. Their mandate: to deliver socially equitable, environmentally

sound, and economically scalable development outcomes through green technology innovations for habitat, water, energy, and waste management. Their field implementation arm is TARA (Technology and Action for Rural Advancement), established as a social enterprise within the DA Group in 1985.

The DA Group's 2024-25 Annual Report documents: 22,400 enterprises supported, securing 95,177 livelihoods and creating 38,232 jobs across diverse regions. Finance unlocked: INR 1.84 million. Enterprise creation per day: 77 in FY 2024-25, up from 42 in FY 2023-24. These are not programme outputs. They are market outcomes produced by building an ecosystem of sustainable enterprises.

TARA: Technology That Creates Livelihoods

TARA's most documented technology is the compressed earth block press — a machine that enables communities to produce building materials from locally available soil, reducing dependence on burned brick (which requires significant fuel) and cement (which is expensive and energy-intensive). The technology has been deployed across India and internationally, creating small enterprise livelihoods for operators while reducing construction costs and environmental impact simultaneously.

TARA's model as an "enabler" and "aggregator": it builds livelihood support systems, training and capacity building for rural poor and marginalised communities; bundles support service packages; connects local producer groups to markets; and aggregates the output of micro and small enterprises. This intermediary function — between poor producers and markets, between sustainable technology and mainstream construction — is the work that neither government nor pure market actors typically do.

The Handmade Paper Enterprise

DA's handmade paper units in Jhansi — turning sustainable materials into economic opportunity — are documented in the 2024-25 Annual Report as an example of their broader approach: converting waste streams and alternative materials into enterprise products that have market value and create dignified livelihoods. Women artisans in

Jhansi are producing handmade paper that reaches premium markets through DA's aggregation and market linkage.

The Himalayan Policy Work

DA's collaboration with the Club of Rome-India on sustainable futures for the Himalayan region — addressing forestry, water, farming, tourism, and livelihoods — reflects their engagement at the policy frontier. The Himalayan deliberations produced pathways that address ecological fragility and human wellbeing simultaneously — recognising that the mountain communities most vulnerable to climate change are also the primary stewards of the ecosystems that climate policies need to protect.

For Odisha NGOs: DA's green building materials technology (compressed earth blocks, stabilised mud construction) is directly relevant to tribal housing in Odisha's forested districts, where locally available materials can be the basis for improved housing that communities can afford and build themselves. Their water and sanitation technologies — designed for the most basic conditions — are applicable across Odisha's rural blocks where JJM scheme coverage exists on paper but reliable water delivery does not.

The Skills to Livelihood Programme

DA's Skills to Livelihood programme provides dignified livelihood opportunities for school dropouts, unemployed women, and youth. It offers market-relevant technical and soft skills, enabling participants to secure sustainable livelihoods through placement-linked vocational training. The programme serves as a bridge between young job seekers from marginalised communities and employers — with matching done on the aspirations of youth and women rather than employer convenience alone.

For Odisha NGOs working on tribal youth skill development: DA's model — sustainable technology skills + enterprise creation + market linkage — is more comprehensive than standard DDU-GKY compliance-focused training. It produces not just trainees but entrepreneurs.

Contact and Further Reading

Website: devalt.org | **TARA:** tara.in | **Contact:** New Delhi headquarters

Key evidence:

- DA 2024-25 Annual Report: devalt.org — 22,400 enterprises, 95,177 livelihoods, 38,232 jobs
- Green Finance Platform: DA described as "world's first social enterprise dedicated to sustainable development"
- TARA website: tara.in — technology solutions, enterprise development, rural livelihoods
- TARA/Devex profile: TARA's role as enabler and aggregator for rural producer groups

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