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Tech Awards 2008: Silicon Valley Turns to Technologies that

Benefit the World's Poorest Citizens

Submitted by [Al Hammond](#) on November 17, 2008 - 12:19.

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I had the opportunity to attend the [Tech Museum Awards](#) ceremony last week in San Jose, California. What's interesting about this annual event is not just the social entrepreneurs and their sometimes quite remarkable innovations, but also the way Silicon Valley turns

out to honor them and, at least for an evening, to focus on applying entrepreneurial skills to benefit poor people. This year the event was attended by some 1,500 people including many of the Valley's wealthiest and most powerful Venture Capitalists, CEOs, and networkers.

The mix of enterprises changes every year. This year was especially rich in BoP energy enterprises with seven entries. The prize winner was Distributed Energy Systems India, or [DESI Power](#) (desi means land or village in Hindi), which builds biomass power plants to generate electricity in villages that lack access to it. DESI trains locals to run the plants and also incubates local businesses that need power and enlarge the customer base for the model.

A [wearable solar lighting system](#) that stores up power in a cellphone battery and yields several hours of light in the evenings and technology for [modifying diesel engines to run on virtually any plant oil](#) were also intriguing.

Highlights of a health cluster were [Medmira](#), which has developed inexpensive rapid diagnostics for HIV and Hepatitis, and [Star Syringe](#), the prize-winner, which develops syringes that only allow one use, thus preventing disease transmission by needle reuse. Other prize winning entries included [Digital Studyhall](#), which achieves huge educational impact by the simple plan of recording lessons from good local teachers on digital videos and sharing them with teachers and classes in underprivileged schools. Also [Build Change](#), which designs earthquake-resistant housing and trains local communities to build them.

The annual [humanitarian award](#) was given to Muhammad Yunus, who reminded the audience of the many social enterprises he has created or is still creating beyond his microfinance venture to benefit the poor of Bangladesh.

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