Musings of a mobile anthropologist

Tales of technology, anthropology, conservation and development

Ken Banks
kiwanja.net

Don't ask what the world needs.
Ask what makes you come alive, and go do that.
Because what the world needs is people who come alive.

Howard Thurman, 1899 - 1981

HELLO

Welcome to Musings of a Mobile Anthropologist, a collection of thoughts, experiences and observations collected over a fifteen year career in the world of technology-for-development. It's been a rewarding and frustrating time in equal measure, but I'm grateful that I've been able to do something that I loved, every day.

The seeds for what was to become my later life's work were planted at a very young age. My mother encouraged me to be inquisitive, enquiring and curious. My love of nature and the outdoors, which would later lead me to conservation work in Africa, started by spending long days and evenings outside, mixed with country walks collecting insects and flowers, and looking and listening for birds. A local club introduced me to computers, and I made the most of an unexpected talent for programming. And a little later Live Aid, a global music event organized in response to the Ethiopian famine in 1985, kick started a curiosity and interest in global development.

Through kiwanja.net, which I founded in January 2003, I managed to combine all of my interests and worked hard to shift the needle on how we use existing and emerging technology to solve social and environmental problems around the world, of which there are many. I remain excited by the potential that digital technologies present, but as many of the entries in this collection show I'm also frustrated with our lack of progress, and with what appears to be a lack of political will to put things right.

My kiwanja.net journey ended in April 2018, after an incredible fifteen years, with a return to the corporate world. Following a period of personal reflection I decided I'd probably done all I could, and it was time for a change. Family circumstances also meant that for the first time in my life I needed a degree of financial security. It is no longer just about me. The collection here represents the most popular writing from my website and, now that I've called time, are a definitive account of how a sector has emerged, evolved and changed - and the challenges it faces going forward – from the perspective of someone thrust right into the middle of it.

If you're passionate about helping make the world a better place, work hard to be part of the solution, not part of the problem. Work in the best interests of the people you're trying to help, not yours. Ask questions, challenge everything, don't be afraid to speak out, and never forget the bigger picture. These are values I have carried with me throughout my career, and I hope they - and some of the writing in this collection - prove useful to you in yours. I wish you well.

Cambridge, UK | April 2018

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Banks, Founder of kiwanja.net and creator of messaging platform FrontlineSMS, devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world. He has worked at the intersection of technology, anthropology, conservation and development for the past twenty-five years and, during that time, has lived and worked across the African continent.

He is a PopTech Fellow, a Tech Awards Laureate, an Ashoka Fellow and a National Geographic Emerging Explorer, and has been internationally recognised for his technology-based work. In 2013 he was nominated for the TED Prize, and in 2015 was a Visiting Fellow at RMIT University in Melbourne, Australia. In late 2015 Ken was appointed CARE International's first Entrepreneur in Residence, and in 2017 was appointed Entrepreneur in Residence at DFID. He is also a published author, with his first edited book, "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator", self-published in late 2013 with a follow-up, published by Kogan Page, released in March 2016.
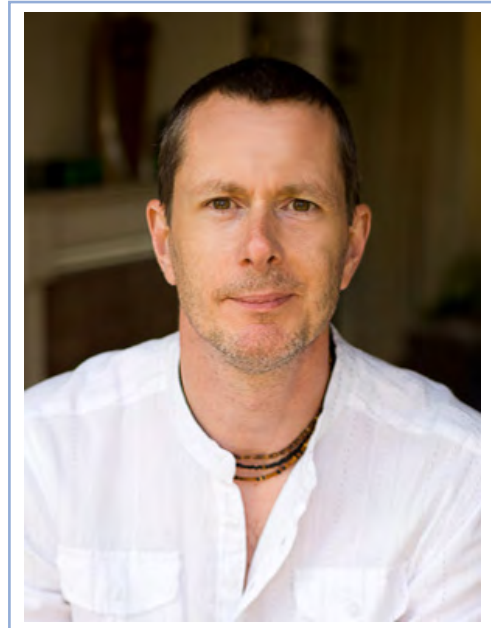
More recently Ken was presented the Eugene L. Lawler Award for Humanitarian Contributions within Computer Science by the Association for Computing Machinery in the USA.

You can read more about Ken's work on his website at kiwanja.net

WHY WE NEED MORE ANTHROPOLOGISTS

Today I'm back at the University of Edinburgh talking to anthropology students about how I've used my degree in my global technology/development career. I can't overstate how refreshing it is to speak to a room not obsessed with technology, or scaling projects, or measuring impact. For me, it's always started with the people and, for everyone in the room, it will be the same. I've long advised people interested in a career in global development to study anthropology (better still, anthropology with development studies, as I did at Sussex University).

It may sound crazy, but there aren't enough people focused on understanding people in the technology-for-development world (one week field trips carrying out surveys don't count). You see plenty of 'Technology Advisor' roles, but where are the 'People Advisors'? There's plenty of everything else, just not enough of that. I'm currently looking at work opportunities in the technology-for-development sector, and don't think I've seen a single job description define a major requirement for time spent in the field, understanding the context of technology use in global development. And, of course, no mention of the word 'anthropology' anywhere. Everything else seems to matter more than that, and it's something we have to put right. Anthropology has a huge amount to offer the sector – it just doesn't seem to know it yet.

A question that I often get asked when people get over the shock that I have an anthropology degree, not something computer science-related, is *"What on earth would anthropologists be doing playing with mobile phones?"*. The answer may be a little more obvious than you think, but let's start at the beginning.

Anthropology is an age-old, at times complex discipline, and like many others it suffers from its fair share of in-fighting and disagreement. It's also a discipline shrouded in a certain mystery. Few people seem to know what anthropology really is, or what anthropologists really do, and a general unwillingness to ask simply fuels the mystery further. Few people ever question, for example, what a discipline better (but often incorrectly) 'known' for poking around with dinosaur bones is doing playing with mobile phones and other digital devices.

What anthropology *isn't*

The public face of anthropology likely sits somewhere close to an Indiana Jones-type character, a dashing figure in khaki dress poking around with ancient relics while they try to unpick ancient puzzles and mysteries, or a bearded old man

working with a leather-bound notepad in a dusty, dimly lit inaccessible room at the back of a museum building. If people were to be believed, anthropologists would be studying everything from human remains to dinosaur bones, old pots and pans, ants and roads. Yes, some people even think anthropologists study roads.

Despite the mystery, in recent years anthropology has witnessed something of a mini renaissance. As our lives become exposed to more and more technology, and companies become more and more interested in how technology affects us and how we interface with it, anthropologists have found themselves in increasing demand. When Genevieve Bell turned her back on academia and started working with Intel in the late 1990's, she was accused of "selling out". Today, anthropologists jump at the chance to help influence future innovation and, for many, working in industry has become the thing to do.

What anthropology *is*

So, if anthropology isn't the study of ants or roads, what is it? Generally described as the scientific study of the origin, the behaviour, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans, anthropology is distinguished from other social sciences – such as sociology – by its emphasis on what's called cultural relativity, the principle that an individuals' beliefs and activities should be interpreted in terms of their own culture, not that of the anthropologist. Anthropology also offers an in-depth examination of context – the social and physical conditions under which different people live – and a focus on cross-cultural comparison. To you and me, that's comparing one culture to another. In short, where a sociologist might put together a questionnaire to try and understand what people think of an object, an anthropologist would immerse themselves in the subject and try to understand it from 'within'.

Anthropology has a number of sub-fields and, yes, one of those does involve poking round with old bones and relics. But for me, development anthropology has always been the most interesting sub-field because of the role it plays in the gobal development arena. As a discipline it was borne out of severe criticism of the general development effort, with anthropologists regularly pointing out the failure of many agencies to analyse the consequences of their projects on a wider, human scale. Sadly, not a huge amount has changed since the 1970's, making development anthropology as necessary today as it has ever been. Many academics – and practitioners, come to that – argue that anthropology should be a key component of the development process. In reality, in some projects it is, and in others it isn't.

The importance of KYC (Know Your Customer)

It's widely recognised that projects can succeed or fail on the realisation of their relative impacts on target communities, and development anthropology is seen as an increasingly important element in determining these positive and negative impacts. In the consumer electronics sector – particularly within emerging market divisions – it is now not uncommon to find anthropologists working within the corridors of hi-tech companies. Intel, Nokia and Microsoft are three such examples. Just as large development projects can fail if agencies fail to understand their target communities, commercial products can fail if companies fail to understand the very same people. In this case, these people go by a different name – customers.

The explosive growth of mobile ownership in the developing world is largely down to a vibrant recycling market and the initial arrival of cheap $20 feature phones (and now $75 smartphones), but is also down in part to the efforts of forward-thinking mobile manufacturers. Anthropologists working for companies such as Nokia spend increasing amounts of time trying to understand what people living at the bottom of the pyramid, or those with very limited disposable income, might want from a phone. Mobiles with flashlights are just one example of a product that can emerge from this brand of user-centric design. Others include mobiles with multiple phone books, which allow more than one person to share a single phone (a practice largely unheard of in many developed markets) and phones which hold multiple SIMs.

My anthropology journey

My first taste of anthropology came a little by accident, primarily down to Sussex University's policy of students having to select a second degree subject to go with their Development Studies option (this was my key interest back in 1996). Social anthropology was one choice, and one which looked slightly more interesting than geography, Spanish or French (not that there's anything wrong with those subjects). During the course of my degree I formed many key ideas and opinions around central pieces of work on the appropriate technology movement and the practical role of anthropology, particularly in global conservation and development work.

Today, mobile devices are closing the digital divide in ways the PC never did. Industry bodies such as the GSM Association, who have previously run Bridging the Digital Divide initiatives, today remain extremely active in the mobile-for-

development sector. International development agencies pump hundreds of millions dollars into economic, health and educational initiatives centred around mobiles and mobile technology. Mobile phones today are almost as exciting as big data, 3D printers and drones.

I'm immensely proud of my anthropology roots, and the insights it has given me in my work. Without it, I'd not have successfully conceived and developed FrontlineSMS. I'm also very proud with my ongoing association with Sussex University in my capacity as Ambassador for International Development.

And I'm always happy to do my part to promote the discipline in the technology-for-development world because I think it needs more – many more – anthropologists walking the corridors if it's to take full advantage of the wonderful digital opportunity it has been given. I just hope it starts paying attention before it's too late.

AN EXPERIMENT IN GIVING

Last week I popped over to Paris to take part in a short UNESCO Working Group meeting. After arriving mid-evening on the Eurostar, I decided to walk the one hour or so to my hotel. There's no better way of seeing a city. Among the usual sites I gradually became more and more aware of the number of young families – refugees – begging on the streets. Children no older than my own sitting out in the cold and dark with nothing as their childhoods drifted away. As a father myself I find dealing with this extremely difficult, something I spoke about at TEDxMunich last year.
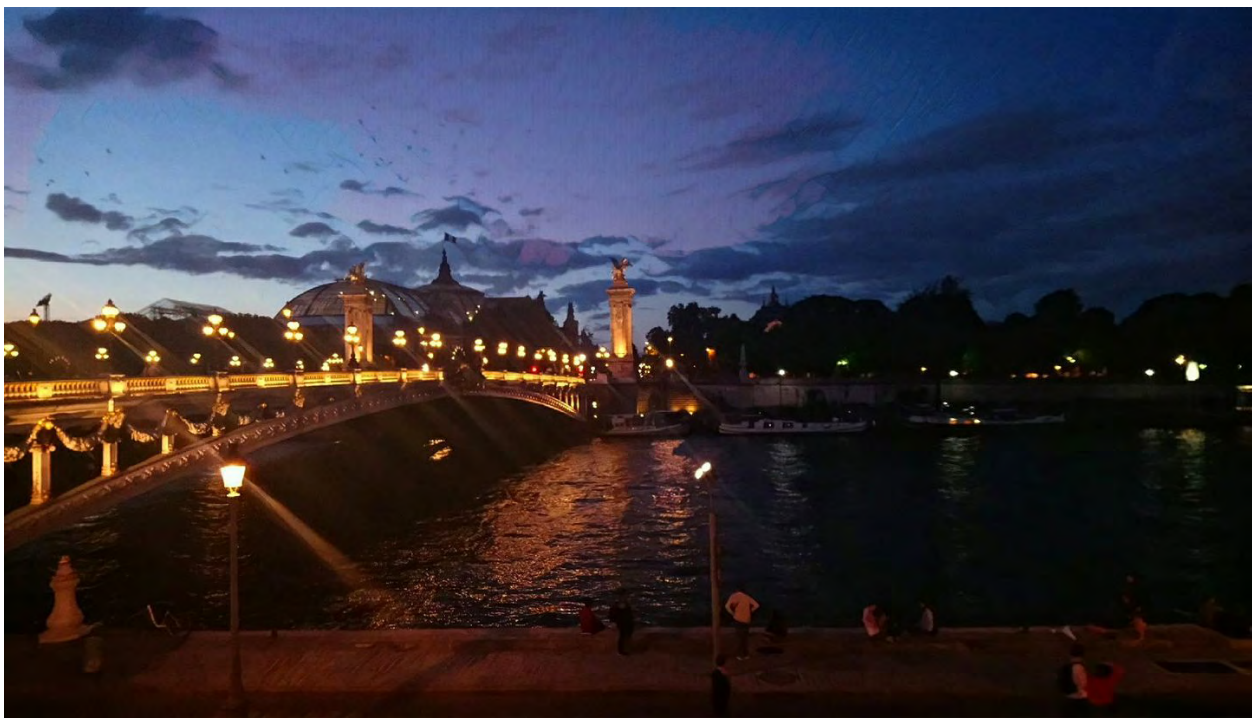
I doubled back and gave one family the €5 note I had in my bag. A pathetic gesture given their position. But the hopelessness of the situation did get me thinking again about random acts of kindness, and the act of 'giving out of kindness and nothing more'.

With this fresh in my mind, the day after I got back I decided to try out a little experiment. I posted a Twitter poll to see if I could get the answer to a question that had been on my mind for a while. I had no idea what to expect and, although the sample size wasn't fantastic, I was encouraged enough by the results to work a little more on the idea.

Ken Banks ✔
@kiwanja

Would you give a stranger say $5 a month - unconditionally - if it 'just' made their lives happier, easier and gave them hope, no questions?

Yes, I would.	69%
No, too 'risky'.	6%
Not sure.	25%

51 votes • Final results

So, over the weekend I posted up a call on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn for contributors to do just that – donate an unconditional amount to a stranger each month. I upped the monthly payment a little, asking for monthly contributions of $15/£10, and capped the commitment at 12 months. By the time the weekend was out, over 30 people had pledged to help. Pledges have continued to come in.

Through a trusted, long-time contact in Nigeria we have already identified ten women and their families as recipients of the monthly donations. Assuming everyone goes through with their pledge, every family will receive approximately $50 each month which, based on our initial conversations with them will give an average of a 50% increase in disposable income.

There are two sets of wider questions I've been wanting to answer by doing this.

On the contributor side

- Would people be happy to give money without knowing how it was going to be spent?

- Would people be happy to give money without knowing anything about the recipient?

- Would people be happy to give money without any guarantee of impact or results?

- Are people happy giving 'just' to help make someones life easier, and to give them hope?

- At what level of giving do these things not matter?

- At what level of giving do these things matter?

- Do people need 'trusted intermediaries' (i.e. charities) in order to feel comfortable giving?

- How important is the feeling of a direct connection with the recipient?

- How important is full transparency and honesty/openness in a project like this?

- Is there a future for this kind of giving?

On the receiver side

- What difference does it make in the lives of the recipients knowing that people are willing to help them?

- Does giving them hope and the potential to improve their lives make any difference to them and their families?

- What do they choose to spend the money on?

- What impact does it have that the money is unconditional?

- Is there any long term impact of receiving this help over a 12 month period?

- Is there a future for this kind of receiving?

Long-time friend Marieme Jamme has already raised concerns about the notion of 'experimenting' with a group of women, drawing parallels with the many other development efforts and pilots that treat target African populations as guinea pigs for Western ideas. I have worked hard throughout my career to work closely with grassroots organisations, and to empower local actors. Although I appreciate her concerns, I believe making the gift unconditional, and over an extended period, genuinely gives these women and their families a chance to better their lives, and everyone involved in the project is doing it for the right reasons, and out of a desire to be part of something that might make a difference.

The project also potentially answers some very interesting – and potentially disruptive – questions around the nature of personal, direct, unconditional giving. Charities spend huge amounts of time and money making the case for their projects, and collecting evidence to prove impact (which sometimes, if we're honest, isn't as accurate as we'd like it to be).

If enough people are willing to give a modest amount without worrying too much about the guarantees most charities think they need and want, how much more good can be done? How many more people might give? What might this mean for the future of personal, charitable giving?

The parameters of the project are still being decided with the contributors, but it is our intention to be as open and transparent as possible about what we're doing, and how we're doing it – so expect some kind of project website soon.

DOING GOOD?
OR DO-GOODER?

We all like to think our work makes a difference, even if we're not really sure if it does. I'm well known for 'doing good in the world' yet even I question what that really means, or who precisely where might be better off in some way because of my chosen career path. For many people, feeling like they're doing good is likely enough. For me, it's not.

I've worked hard over the years to ground everything I do in some kind of reality. All those years working with grassroots NGOs across Africa, all that time trying to understand their problems and realities – being able to see, live, taste, smell and experience them – has given me great insight, but also made me incredibly impatient for change. In the technology-for-development sector, where donors always seem hungry for the 'next big thing', I like to drive home the point that we need to be solving problems today, for people suffering today, with tools available today. For some people there is no tomorrow. For others, no next year. Others may be living longer, but they're living in poverty for longer. I see little worth celebrating in that.

Anyone that knows me will know I'm always challenging and questioning global development, and always challenging my own role within it. I feel I've been fortunate to have spent the vast majority of my career working independently, giving me the freedom to be open and honest, and to pursue the things that I see as important, not things which suit a particular trend or political agenda. Sadly too much of the wider work that goes on suffers because of the very reason that it does.

Earlier this week I read a post from Pete Vowles, Head of DFID in Kenya. Pete has been instrumental in the 'Doing Development Differently' movement, and in his post he shares his experiences 'living' with a family in Kenya for 24 hours, a family living well below the poverty line. It's a harrowing read, and something everyone working in global development should print off and stick above their desks as a reminder of what development was meant to be about.

One thing that struck me, and moved me most, was Susan's lack of hope and how, in Pete's words, she felt physically and mentally broken every night as she locked herself and her children in their huts. Dignity and hope, two things a healthy human spirit really can't do without, have never appeared as key performance indicators in any development project I've worked on. What does it cost to give someone hope?

Pete's post more than anything I've read recently has given me a real jolt, forcing me to be more critical than ever about the work I'm doing, and whether or not I'm really doing good, or just feeling good. For me, development has always been personal. It's not about scale, metrics, KPIs or log frames, but about connecting with real people with real problems. I'm proud that I'm still in contact with, and friends with – and supporting – many FrontlineSMS users years after I stepped back from the project. Friendships outlast any development timeframe, as should our desire to be there for the people we seek to help. Perhaps this, more than anything, should be my own personal KPI, and how I judge whether my efforts have ultimately been worth it or not.

IN CELEBRATION OF AN APPROACH LESS TRAVELLED 🔗

I'm in San Francisco this week on a surprise trip to collect an award for a product I designed and built over a decade ago. The fact the early work of FrontlineSMS is still being recognised twelve years on speaks volumes to the approach, and the impact it had – not only in the hands of users themselves, but also in the minds of others looking to apply technology for social good. It struck a chord with an emerging narrative that said we should build appropriate tools that genuinely empowered the people closest to the problem, and that our job was, if anything, to build those tools, hand them over and then get the hell out of the way. If you look at the tweets from the many ICT4D and social innovation conferences today, this remains an approach popular within our sector.

But while tweeting and speaking are one thing, doing is another. Sure, for me this week should be about celebration, but I remain frustrated with a sector which claims to be hungry for learning, and hungry to scale ' what works', yet very little of what made FrontlineSMS successful has been made use of in any meaningful way. This is not just disappointing on a professional level, but a personal one, too.

FRONTLINESMS PROVIDES THE TOOLS NECESSARY FOR PEOPLE TO CREATE THEIR OWN PROJECTS THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE. IT EMPOWERS INNOVATORS AND ORGANISERS IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD TO ACHIEVE THEIR FULL POTENTIAL THROUGH THEIR OWN INGENUITY - INTERVIEW IN AFRICA JOURNAL

Nothing quite matches the energy and excitement of grassroots organisations building out their own ideas and solutions off the back of a platform you've created. The idea that you might stop what you're doing and others will continue the work is something we should all aspire to. In the global development sector we call this 'sustainability'. Yet, how often do we see it?

Nothing quite matches the organic growth that becomes possible when you build genuinely open, empowering platforms. I'm immensely proud of the way our users embraced it, and equally proud of the smart, young innovators such as Josh Nesbit and Ben Lyon who were drawn to our work, and whose early efforts with FrontlineSMS:Medic and FrontlineSMS:Credit lead to the creation of two incredibly exciting and innovative organisations in Medic Mobile and Kopo Kopo. Kevin Starr once told me that he was fascinated by how FrontlineSMS had become an incubator for so many other ideas and initiatives. Sadly I'm not sure what I can point to today that does anywhere near the same thing.

While we were clearly doing something right, funding remained a constant struggle, and the lessons we were learning and sharing were falling on deaf ears. Only two studies of note examined the impact and approach of FrontlineSMS – a paper by Medic Mobile, and a brilliant chapter in Bits and Atoms written by Sharath Srinivasan. For a project which had such a high profile, and one that powered grassroots interventions in over 170 countries, the lack of interest in trying to understand what truly made it succeed is a huge disappointment. After all, as a sector we're hardly blessed with success stories of initiatives that scale. From what I can tell, the sector is just too busy chasing the next big thing at the expense of existing opportunities right under its nose.

When I look around today, I still see tools being built far away from the problem with little understanding of the users or their context (except for the odd trip some projects take so they can tick the 'HCD' box). Challenges and competitions are the new big thing, with entries voted up or down like a beauty competition by others with little idea of the problem or those effected by it. You don't stop someone on the street and ask for medical advice, so why do the same with an idea to solve a medical problem in a developing country? I recently wrote about the madness of innovation challenges.

So, as I attend the awards ceremony this coming weekend I'll quietly thank all those unsung heroes who helped turn FrontlineSMS into the breakthrough story that it first became all those years ago. And I'll continue to hope that we can be brave enough as a community to work through many of the problems hindering our ability to build yet more tools that genuinely put the power to change in the hands of those who need it most. Unfortunately, experience tells me to not hold out too much hope.

THE END OF A GOLDEN AGE OF DISCOVERY?

Exactly six years ago this week I was in Washington DC to collect the Pizzigati Prize for Software in the Public Interest, and award given each year to an individual who has created or led an effort to create an open source software product of significant value to the non-profit sector and movements for social change. While the Prize came in a golden spell for me and my work, I wonder if that golden age of discovery in our wider sector – which I was privileged to be a part of – is now over?

When Livingstone, Stanley and Speke set out on their voyages of adventure across Africa, their objective was not only discovery but to show the impossible was possible – that you could penetrate into the heart of Africa – the 'Dark Continent' – and live to tell the tale. Although later discoveries and adventures still roused public and press interest (and awards and recognition for the individuals involved) for many that early raw, frontier period was gone, never to return.

When I look back through the 15-year history of kiwanja.net, much of the first few years felt like a period of raw expectation and raw exploration. It was a bit of a Wild West. Nobody really knew what would work, how it might work, or who it might benefit. Most people weren't even aware of the early signs of what was to famously become the 'mobile revolution'. Back then, innovation wasn't a word thrown around casually, you could have put everyone working in mobile-for-development into a local cinema, and there wasn't such a thing as best practice. For me and many of those around me, it felt like those early days for Livingstone, Stanley and Speke. It felt like we were making trails that others might follow, but we didn't know where they would lead, if anywhere, and what we might learn.

My early work, without any doubt, felt like it came in a golden age. It felt like we were forging a path – one centred around the use of SMS in conservation and development – where no-one else had been before. Like those early Africa explorers, interest and fascination among the public and press was high. And because of it, the project grew and awards and recognition came. Over a six year period multiple fellowships, awards and prizes arrived, along with considerable amounts of funding for FrontlineSMS which, for a while, seemed to be everywhere. You could try anything, safely in the knowledge that it was unlikely anyone else had tried it before.

In the true spirit of adventure, in 2010 I had the huge privilege of being named a National Geographic Emerging Explorer. At the time it felt like a very bold

move by the Selection Committee. Almost all of the other Emerging Explorers were either climbing, diving, scaling, digging or building, and what I do hardly fits into your typical adventurer job description. But as I think about it today, as I write this post, in a way it does. As mobile technology continued its global advance, figuring out ways of applying the technology in socially and environmentally meaningful ways was a kind of 21st century exploring. Since 2010 a number of other friends and colleagues have gone on to be named Emerging Explorers whilst working in the technology sector, continuing a trend at National Geographic of reframing exploration in a digital age.

Today – as I reflect on this, the later stages of my career – my time is increasingly spent helping others cut their own route, and sharing stories of those who succeed. Today we have more tools than ever at our disposal to help solve the social and environmental problems around us – perhaps too many – but despite this the golden age feels over. Our field has become professionalised, and with it we have lost a lot of the magic.

In reality, all that has really changed is that frontiers have shifted. Maybe I just prefer the one I lived through all those years ago.

ANNOUNCING OUR FOUR-PART MANIFESTO FOR CHANGE

For almost fifteen years kiwanja.net has been home for our hopes, dreams and frustrations on all things technology, social innovation, and international conservation and development. During that time we've widely travelled, spoken, published, built, consulted, mentored and despaired. It's been an incredible journey that started in early 2003 on the fringes of Kruger National Park, and we've had plenty of opportunities to see what does and what doesn't work along the way. Crucially, we've stayed small and independent over that time, allowing us to remain honest and challenging when and where we need to be.

One of our earlier, seminal posts from 2009 – "Time to eat our own dog food?" – challenged the sector to not waste the opportunity that mobile phones gave us, asking:

Is the future of social mobile an empowered few, or an empowered many? Mobile tools in the hands of the masses presents great opportunity for NGO-led social change, but is that the future we're creating?

Sadly, much of the same argument outlined in that post can be applied today, placing something of a question mark over what progress we've made. We know, for example, that many projects still rarely optimise for their beneficiaries and the environments in which they operate, and despite what they often claim, many set out as solutions looking for a problem. Too many initiatives still lead with technology, and fail to scale into sustainable programs – in part because donors are constantly under pressure to disburse funds to new and 'innovative' projects, rarely giving older projects time to mature.
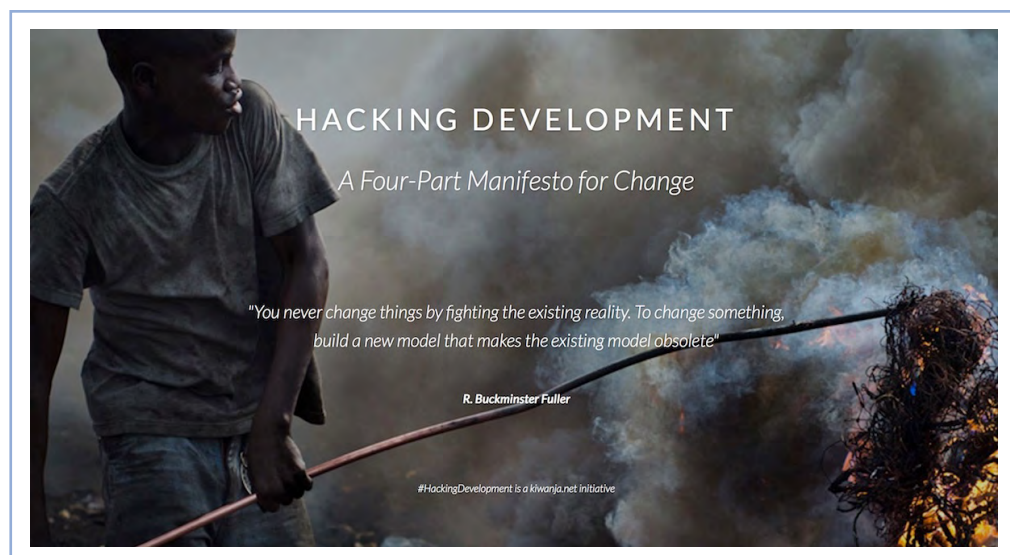
There is still no minimum standard for funding development projects, either. As a result, money struggles to find it's way to the projects most likely to succeed, and a vicious cycle ensues. Worse still, despite talk of local capacity building and ownership, the vast majority of programs are still conceptualised, executed and funded by outsiders and parachuted in.

And to top it all, as a sector we still lack a shared vision of the future we all should be working towards. All of this adds up to a cycle of underperformance, perpetuated by the fact that feedback loops between donors, practitioners, policy makers, academia, civil society and program beneficiaries remain at best weak.

We can, and should, be better than this.

One thing I'm particularly proud of is that we've offered solutions when we've identified problems over the years. It's far too easy to rant about how rubbish everything is, and it goes without saying it's much harder, yet undoubtedly more productive, to offer ways forward. Over the past few years in particular, many of those bigger ideas have sufficiently matured to allow us to today launch our new Four-Part Manifesto for Change.

This new Manifesto focuses on four areas in particular that we feel need positive disruption in our field.

HACKING DEVELOPMENT

A Four-Part Manifesto for Change

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete"

R. Buckminster Fuller

#HackingDevelopment is a kiwanja.net initiative

PAINTING A SHARED, FUTURE VISION
Working closely with innovators and entrepreneurs from the places where the problems exist, we propose the creation of a new policy paper that helps us achieve a future where local innovators and local innovations drive the development agenda. You can download a summary PDF of that proposal here.

A NEW CODE OF CONDUCT FOR DONORS
We believe that donors are in an ideal position to stem the flow of poorly thought-out or inadequately planned technology-for-development projects and propose the adoption of a Charter to put things right. You can read about that here.

SERIOUSLY GET BEHIND OUR TOP TALENT
Offering long-term support to some of our top talent would increase the chances of them – and us – having a positive global impact. We focus too much on projects and not the people who drive them. You can read our thoughts on a new Global Fellowship Programme here.

TIME TO ANSWER THE BIG QUESTION
Do international development projects designed and managed at grassroots level perform better than those managed from the outside? The debate rages, so we propose a development challenge to help us find the answer. You can read more about how that might work here.

To reach our full potential, and to alleviate as much suffering on the planet as possible, we need to be bold, embrace appropriate innovation and be open to disruption in our **own** sector, not just others. We need to face up to our problems, failures and inefficiencies, and be brave in seeking new solutions when things go wrong. Our Manifesto offers four new solutions to four of those long-standing problems.

We hope this might be the start of a wider, bolder conversation where we begin putting into action projects and programmes that put the needs of the people we seek to help before those of ourselves or our organisations – however uncomfortable that may be.

You can read more on our Manifesto at hackingdevelopment.org

TIME FOR A 'SLOW INNOVATION' MOVEMENT?

Dear fellas. I can't believe how fast things move on the outside. I saw an automobile once when I was a kid, but now they're everywhere. The world went and got itself in a big damn hurry

Brooks – quoted in the Shawshank Redemption

Today everyone seems to be in such a rush. From the time it takes to fly across the Atlantic to the time it takes Google to pull together your search results, speed is everything. Products are increasingly rushed to market, investors are increasingly impatient for exit and the social innovation community – that's us – are increasingly impatient for scale. We have innovation accelerators left, right and centre and if we fail, well, we need to do that fast as well. When did *we* get in such a big hurry?

When I speak at conferences I often highlight the disconnect between funding cycles and the time it takes for a technology solution to firstly get a little traction, and then get to some kind of scale (depending on your definition of scale). Typically, how long does it take an innovation to take hold? One year? Two years? Three years? Five years? If we're honest we don't know. All we do know is that we usually lose patience (or interest) after a couple of years or so.

I often speak of my own experience with FrontlineSMS, which took about three years to really get going, and – if I'd taken funding and committed to deadlines and deliverables early on – how it would likely have not made it that long. As a product, maybe it just needed three years to bed in, to take hold in the imagination of its users, for news to filter down. If that's the case then speeding up the process through an accelerator of some kind would have been counterproductive, and perhaps also lead to an early demise. Sometimes things just take time.

It begs the question: How many potentially great products have died prematurely because they weren't given the time? Or because they were rushed? What proportion of projects do accelerators kill compared to those they genuinely accelerate?

As with many things in the social innovation and international development sectors (including innovation challenges), we don't have the evidence either way. Just as small is often cited as beautiful, perhaps we need to recognise that sometimes slow might be sensible?

Accelerators almost certainly have their place as one of a number of tools and approaches, but we seem to be painting everything with the same brush. Acceleration might not be best for everyone and everything. Maybe speed only really matters if:

- You've quit your day job and need to start earning money fast
- You've banked some money to prove your idea – and the clock is ticking
- You're working to some arbitrary deadline – a competition closing date, or a school term, or a funding deadline
- You're working in the midst of an unfolding crisis and your solution was needed yesterday
- You're worried that a 'competitor' is going to beat you to market
- You're impatient

In the social innovation and international development worlds we seem to have fallen into our fair share of self-made traps. Assuming scale is everything is one of them. So is believing that open source is best for everything – without question. And that innovation challenges hold the key to unlocking all our great ideas.

Maybe questioning why we're always in such a damn hurry should be another.

FARMING OR SCRATCHING? AN INNOVATION DILEMMA

A basketball referee almost gets lynched at a match in Brazil when his pea whistle breaks at a crucial point in a game. A real estate agent drops hot coffee over himself after the serviette wrapped around the cup by the barista slips off while he's driving. And a young man going bald who decides he might as well shave his head completely gets frustrated after finding that traditional razors just can't do the job.

Meet Ron Foxcroft, inventor of the Fox 40 Whistle; Jay Sorensen, inventor of the Java Jacket; and Todd Greene, inventor of the Headblade.

I came across the inspiring stories of these three inventors during my flight to Boston earlier today. And it reminded me of something the person I was due to meet in Boston, Erik Hersman, said to me a couple of years ago while he was writing about Ushahidi for my first book, The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator.

In his chapter, one of the main reasons Erik highlighted as critical to the success of Ushahidi was that they were "scratching their own itch". They were solving their own problem, and because they owned it and fully understood it, they were fully vested in solving it. Kenya was in meltdown (it was the 2008 election crisis) and they realised if they didn't help capture what was going on around the country then it was unlikely anyone else would. Knowing whether friends were safe was important to them.

What struck me about Ron, Jay, Todd and Erik is that they were all scratching their own itch. Their stories follow a similar trajectory – people out minding their own business, then having a eureka moment after struggling with something, then relentlessly pursuing it to a conclusion. In all these cases there were dark moments – times where packing up was easier than pushing on – but because finding an answer mattered at a very personal (and often financial) level, giving up was never an option.

Ever since the concept of reluctant (and accidental) innovation started to capture my attention several years ago, I've constantly found myself looking at how the international development and social innovation sectors 'innovate and invent' compared to outsiders who are simply 'scratching their own itch'. Is innovation in a controlled 'innovation challenge' environment more conducive to finding workable solutions to global development challenges? Or do ideas seeded in the wild, by accident, by people scratching their own itch, lead to more useful, meaningful, relevant and lasting solutions?

Sadly, I don't think we have the evidence right now – despite the huge resources going into challenges and competitions these days. The sector seems to be arguing it both ways – saying we need to support local innovation as it puts ever more funding and resources into the pockets of outside problem solvers.

It would seem to me that, right now, we probably fall into one of two camps:

Farm ideas from the masses
You believe that the best ideas come from challenging the masses to come up with ideas, and dangle carrots in the form of funding, mentorship, fame and support to encourage people to share them.

Provide medication for the itch
You throw funding, mentorship and support at people scratching their own itch (who usually need little encouragement to seek a solution). These people will often – but not always – be local inventors and innovators assuming you're looking to solve 'traditional' development problems across the third world.

The first approach is quicker – perhaps lazier? – but creates a buzz and excitement over social media that's hard to beat. The second option is slower, requires more graft and in most instances plays out offline. You can understand why fewer funders or innovation-based institutions take that route.

For as long as I can remember there has been a tension between local vs. imported innovation. Right now the two camps people fall into is largely based on 'what feels right' to them, or who pays their wages. Of course, without any evidence it's impossible to know which approach delivers the most appropriate, workable solutions. But based on what I've seen and written about over the past decade, it's very clear to me that people who scratch their own itch seem to get it in ways that outsiders with no itch can't.

THE INNOVATION/ PERMISSION PARADOX

On a recent trip to Dar Es Salaam I got talking to an entrepreneur at one of those many technology pitching events popping up across the continent. After a few minutes of the usual small talk (which, of course, included a full review of the English Premier League season ahead) I asked him what idea he and his team were working on.

He explained to me that he was the CEO of a Tanzanian start-up that had developed a new gamification technique which, integrated within a new mobile app they were building, helped tackle childhood obesity. "Is that a problem here in Tanzania?" I asked him. He told me that it wasn't and that it didn't matter because their app was aimed at the American market, where it was a growing problem. They were going to focus on the West Coast initially, where they hoped to get enough traction to attract investors and then scale it across the rest of the USA.

I asked if he had a medical background at all, and whether he'd been to the United States and seen the problem first hand. He answered no on both occasions. Again, he didn't see this as a problem, nor that none of his team, or Tanzanian-dominated Board, had ever been to the USA either.

This all struck me as a rather odd, rather strange approach, and I couldn't help but wonder why he was doing this. "People in the United States will think you're mad", I told him. He didn't seem to mind and said they were going to do it anyway because they wanted to work on a big problem that was meaningful, somewhere far away, and that could scale.

They didn't win, but were given credit for their ambition and for taking on such a big first world problem.

Now, let's flip this story another way.

On a recent trip to Washington DC I attended a pitching event at one of the many start-up accelerators in the city. I ended up sitting next to an entrepreneur who told me he was building a mobile app to help African farmers get better access to market information, helping them produce better yields and get better prices for what they grew.

I asked him if he knew anything about farming in Africa, or agricultural markets, or if he'd ever been to the continent. "Not really", he replied, "but plenty of other entrepreneurs I know have won pitching competitions in the past, regardless.

So I think we'll get by". None of his Board, or Advisory Committee, had any experience either, "but they are successful US-based entrepreneurs and know technology inside-out so we've got some great people behind us, and they think we've got a great idea with great potential", he added. They picked this problem because they wanted to help poor people in Africa.

They didn't win, but secured three interviews with technology and innovation news sites, and have a follow-on meeting with an investor who was in the room and who thought their idea was great.

Why is it that the first idea comes across as crazy or odd, yet the second one doesn't – despite them being the same thing? And perhaps more crucially, how did we ever get to the point where an American solving an African problem is par for the course, yet an African taking on an American problem isn't? Or even an African solving an African problem?

Explain/discuss.

Thanks to CARE colleague Mark Malhotra who inspired this blog post during a conversation earlier today in Dar Es Salaam.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO ME: ON HALF CENTURIES AND LEGACIES 🔗

This time tomorrow, fifty years ago, I came into the world and spent the proceeding twenty-seven years trying to figure out what the hell I was doing here. With the summer of 1993 came something of a rebirth, one that put me on the path to where I am today. But the years before were dominated by prolonged spells of frustration, searching and disappointment. It feels, at times, that I've only lived half a life, which is probably why I don't feel anything like the fifty I'll be tomorrow.

Birthdays with significant numbers often bring with them periods of reflection, although reflecting is something I tend to do on a regular basis. I'm my own worse critic, always challenging and never allowing myself the opportunity to feel comfortable, or develop any sense of achievement in what I'm doing. I'm ridiculously driven and, because of that, tend to see the glass half empty most of the time, reflecting on things I'm yet to do rather than the things I've done. There's never been room for complacency in my life. There's always more to be done.
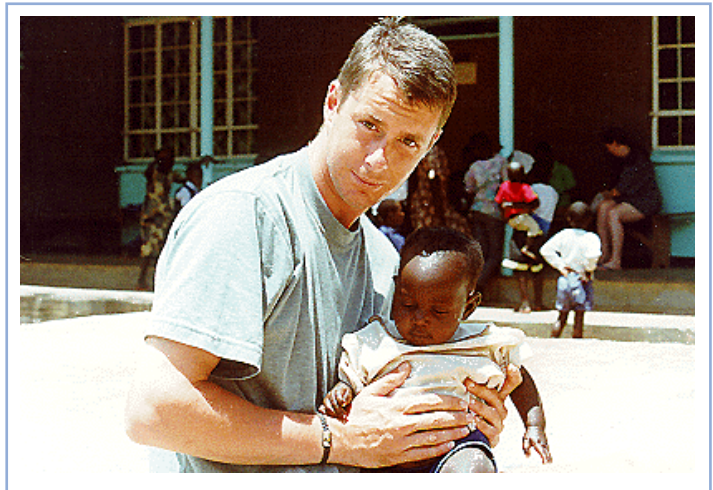
In the twenty-three years I feel I've actually 'lived' a life I've certainly crammed a lot in, even if it doesn't always feel like enough. Living and working across eight African countries, getting a degree, building out one of the more successful mobile messaging platforms, speaking all over the world, winning numerous prizes and awards, publishing two books and building out my spiritual home on the web – kiwanja.net – into a well established social innovation/development site. And none of that includes the more recent addition of a young family – something I thought I'd never have given all the time that had passed me by.

If anything, having children has had the effect of driving me even harder, if that were at all possible. What I see happening to other families around the world compared to the peace and stability of life at home tears me up in ways I struggle to describe. Life is cruel. The refugee crisis is a bigger reason as any to not become complacent. There **is** plenty more to be done.

Birthdays with significant numbers also put more of a spotlight on legacy, but in this case not mine – more the people who have been instrumental in shaping the last twenty-three years of my own life. People like Freddie Cooper, who let me tear into his Commodore PET computers in the early 1980s, an act not as destructive as it sounds but one that built the foundations of all my later technology-based work. Or Karen Hayes and Simon Hicks, who called me up from my sick bed in the autumn of 2002 offering me the chance to explore an emerging technology – mobile phones – and their potential for development.

And, of course, there was my mother, who encouraged and supported me the whole way, and who thankfully lived long enough to realize, as my work took off, that all her efforts and sacrifice were worth it. Sadly she never got to meet Henry, our first child, who was born four months after she died. She would have made a brilliant grandmother.

In an early school report I was described as 'too sensitive' and, if I'm honest, a vast majority of the things I choose to do are a reaction to that oversensitivity. Empathy, something that seems to be lacking in many, exists in abundance and I have no problem identifying with the suffering of others, whatever and wherever it may be. One of my favourite films of all time is The Green Mile, and one of the stand-out quotes from John Coffey, the central character, resonates for that very reason:

I'm tired, boss. Tired of bein' on the road, lonely as a sparrow in the rain. Tired of not ever having me a buddy to be with, or tell me where we's coming from or going to, or why. Mostly I'm tired of people being ugly to each other. I'm tired of all the pain I feel and hear in the world everyday. There's too much of it. It's like pieces of glass in my head all the time. Can you understand?

Figuring out how we might use technology to raise levels of empathy, compassion and understanding is close to the top of the list of things I'm yet to do. It's one of those ideas that's been gently burning away in the background for years, but now feels like a good time to focus on it a little more. This weekend I started reading a new book.

I've been very fortunate over the years to develop a way of working which allows me to write, speak, consult and earn money and then use excess funds to subsidise many of my own personal projects. In each case I've done most of the work myself to keep costs down, and used WordPress to develop the websites. Ideas I've managed to work on the past couple of years or so include two books, Donors Charter and Everyday Problems. Right now I'm working on a new mobile giving app called altruly, another app with a working title of For My Children, and a wider thought-leadership piece going by the name of Hacking Development.

SIMON BARON-COHEN
ZERO DEGREES of EMPATHY
A NEW THEORY OF HUMAN CRUELTY
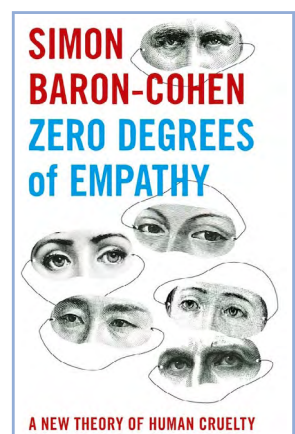
It's for others to judge how significant, meaningful or impactful my work has been but, whatever the outcome, I'll continue on as I have for the past twenty-three years. I still have a distant dream of opening a community cafe, but am saving that for the end.

The biggest challenge for me is going to be knowing when that is.

DUE DILIGENCE? WE NEED AN APP FOR THAT

The ubiquity of mobile phones, the reach of the Internet, the shear number of problems facing the planet, competitions and challenges galore, pots of money and strong media interest in tech-for-good projects has today created the perfect storm. Not a day goes by without the release of an app hoping to solve something, and the fact so many people are building so many apps to fix so many problems can only be a good thing. Right?

The only problem is this. It's become impossible to tell good from bad, even real from fake. It's something of a Wild West out there. So it was no surprise to see this happening recently. Quoting The Guardian:

An app which purported to offer aid to refugees lost in the Mediterranean has been pulled from Apple's App Store after it was revealed as a fake. The I Sea app, which also won a Bronze medal at the Cannes Lions conference on Monday night, presented itself as a tool to help report refugees lost at sea, using real-time satellite footage to identify boats in trouble and highlighting their location to the Malta-based Migrant Offshore Aid Station (Moas), which would provide help.

In fact, the app did nothing of the sort. Rather than presenting real-time satellite footage – a difficult and expensive task – it instead simply shows a portion of a static, unchanging image. And while it claims to show the weather in the southern Mediterranean, that too isn't that accurate: it's for Western Libya.
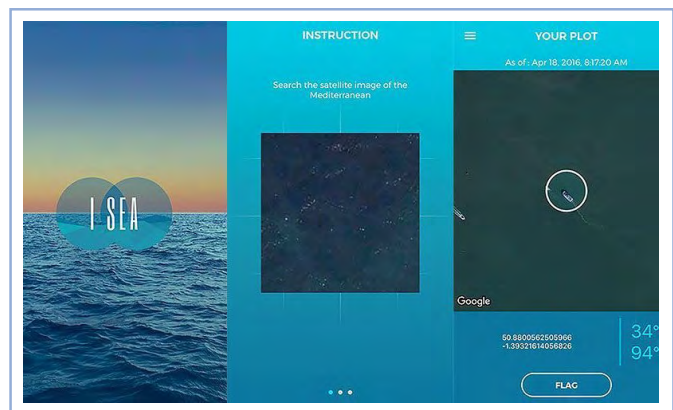
The worry isn't only that someone would decide to build a fake app which 'tackles' such an emotive subject, but the fact that this particular app won an award and received favourable press. Wired, Mashable, the Evening Standard and Reuters all spoke positively about it. Did no-one check that it did what it said it did?

This whole episode reminds me of something Joel Selanikio wrote in his contributing chapter to two books I've recently edited and published. In his chapters, which touch on his work on the Magpi data collection tool in addition to some of the challenges facing the tech-for-development community, Joel wrote:

In going over our user activity logs for the online Magpi app, I quickly realised that no-one from any of our funding organisations was listed. Apparently no-one who was paying us had ever seen our working software! This didn't seem to make sense. Who would pay for software without ever looking at it? And if our funders hadn't seen the software, what information were they using when they decided whether to fund us each year?
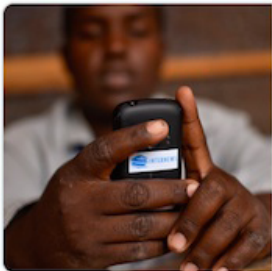
Donors are not alone. Whether you're the media, or a judge in a competition, or a charity looking to make use of an app, surely there's an expectation that some due diligence will be done. In the case of I Sea, perhaps some was, but clearly not enough.

The shear number of apps available that claim to solve all manner of problems may seem encouraging on the surface – 1,500 (and counting) to help refugees might be a case in point – but how many are useful? How many are being used? How many solve a problem? And how many are real?

Due diligence? Maybe it's time we had an app for that.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE YELLING STOPS?

I'm reading two books in parallel right now – Ben Ramalingam's 'Aid on the Edge of Chaos' and Kentaro Toyama's 'Geek Heresy'. With both books I'm finding myself regularly pausing for a nod of approval or a wry smile. Both books are spot on in their identification of the issues – Ben in global development more broadly, and Kentaro in ICT4D, a sector/field/discipline/specialism of global development.

A while back when Bill Easterly published his 'Tyranny of Experts' I started to wonder what impact his previous book – 'The White Man's Burden' – has had on the practice and policy of global development. I have the same question for Dambisa Moyo, too, whose 'Dead Aid' is another classic development critique. Both provide strong arguments for a new aid world order (or, more to the point, no aid at all).

Suffice to say, if you're not a fan or supporter of big development there are countless books out there to feed your anger, frustration and despair. But for all the hundreds of billions of words written over the past decade or two citing the challenges, problems and issues, have any forced any kind of change in how those hundreds of billions of Pounds, Dollars or Euros of development aid were spent? Almost everyone I meet who works in big development has at least one major frustration with it – many have several – but the one that drives me to despair the most is that no-one seems to be able to change anything.

I published my first book – 'The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator' – because I wanted to help steer young social innovators-to-be away from expensive university or design thinking courses and encourage them to firstly get out into the world, meet the people they wanted to help, gain some empathy, and find their passion. Before they did anything. I can't speak for Ben or Kentaro, but they probably hope something might improve or change as a result of their writing efforts, too.

It's easy to rant, but far more productive if we also offer solutions and ways forward. Obama made this point recently when talking about the Black Lives Matter movement, and what he said could equally be applied to international development:

"Once you've highlighted an issue and brought it to people's attention and shined a spotlight, and elected officials or people who are in a position to start bringing about change are ready to sit down with you, then you can't just keep on yelling at them."

Last week I stumbled across a BBC News article provocatively titled Barbie challenges the 'white saviour complex'. It's a brilliant example of creative – innovative? – thinking in how to challenge much of what many see is wrong in our field.

If the purpose of Barbie Savior was to draw attention to the 'warped concept' of volunteerism, poverty tourism or what many would see as the 'condescending nature' of many aid efforts, it has undoubtedly succeeded. Just a selection of headlines include:

'White Savior Barbie' Hilariously Parodies Volunteer Selfies In Africa

Instagram's White Savior Barbie neatly captures what's wrong with "voluntourism" in Africa

White Saviour Barbie's world of orphanage selfies and charity startups

'White Savior Barbie' brilliantly mocks insincere volunteer selfies in Africa

Barbie Savior: The parody that makes aid types feel good, but does nothing

"Barbie Savior" Instagram Account Brilliantly Skewers White Savior Complex

As with the Barbie account, there are plenty of other examples of books, games, conferences and campaigns that seek to raise awareness around the issues in our sector, but few seem to be able to drive change to the same degree that they're able to raise awareness or anger, or laughter, or point fingers. The same tweets get sent out conference after conference, and retweets abound, and heads nod – but again there's very little sense of what can be genuinely done to address the challenges so beautifully described in many of these 140 character outbursts, or in those cleverly Photoshopped Instagram images.

After more than two decades working 'in' global development, my question remains unchanged. What to do when the yelling stops?

IN MALAWI, PROBLEMS AS SYMPTOMS

🔗

When I started out in development I had no idea what I'd be able to do to help solve some of the huge, complex problems out there. But that lack of certainty – and an absence of obvious answers – turned out to be a far better starting point than I ever imagined.

After a trip to Zambia in 1993 to help build a school, I knew immediately that my work in IT and finance in Jersey wasn't the right career for me and that I wanted to spend the rest of my working life doing something more meaningful. But that was all I knew. At that stage I didn't have a skill set that was particularly useful to international development, so there was no obvious quick and easy way in. Instead I set out on an extended period of learning, one where I spent as much time as I could living with, working with, and supporting the communities and causes I wanted to help – everything from a few weeks helping build a local hospital in Uganda to a year working in rural conservation in Nigeria.

The work was often hard and emotionally challenging, but in a way I was fortunate. That decade of learning turned out to be critical, and included a spell at university learning development and the art of social anthropology. The technology piece didn't return until much later, and I'm grateful for that. If mobile phones and the Internet been around in 1993 I'd probably have jumped straight into ICT4D and bypassed all the context – and been far the poorer for it.

I write this as I sit on a flight from Malawi where I've spent a week assessing a teacher absenteeism system as part of my work with CARE. What turned out as a trip to unpick a piece of software turned into one dominated by everything but. Food insecurity, climate change, economics and the politics of education were the real issues, teacher absenteeism just a symptom. The visit reminded me why I got into development – not because of technology, but because of the people, and the very real challenges they face in their lives.

Ken Banks
@kiwanja

Reminded on this trip why I got into #development. Nothing to do with technology, everything to do with the people.

From afar you'd be forgiven for thinking that teachers not showing up for work were just lazy and, although that might be the case for some, for the vast majority the reasons were far more complex than that. It was only after sitting down and speaking to many of them that you realise how teacher absenteeism isn't the real problem after all, and a technology looking to solve a problem might be looking at totally the wrong thing.

Anyone hoping to make use of today's vast toolbox of technologies to solve a problem in international development might be better off keeping it closed at first, and taking time to better understand the context of the problem they're trying to solve. Unfortunately, the availability of technology makes it far too easy to skip that learning step (hence the high rate of failure) and I consider my wider knowledge of development issues to be a far greater asset to those I work with than my programming or technical skills. There's a dedicated Students page on the kiwanja website promoting the merits of this very approach.

With 20% of the country facing severe food insecurity due to an excessive drought, the Malawian Government declared a state of emergency half-way through our trip. We saw piles of food aid at primary schools to feed the children, many of who had little chance of getting it anywhere else, and heard of classes with ratios of 250 students to one teacher, and others with little to no materials and even less hope of getting any any time soon. Many teachers felt undervalued, demotivated and underpaid,

struggling as much as the students they were trying to teach. Somehow, the enormity of these challenges – and how they connected and intertwined – only seem real when you come face-to-face with them. Time in the field beats any amount of time in front of a computer screen.

This trip was a stark reminder of something I already knew – the value of local knowledge, local reality and local perspective on any development effort, regardless of what we assume the problem, or solution, to be.

BEST PRACTICE BEGINS IN THE CLASSROOM

In The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator and my more recent book, Social Entrepreneurship and Innovation, I dedicate more than a few pages to emerging best practice in technology-for-development projects. While we certainly need as many bright minds as possible turning their skills, energy and attention to solving many of the problems in the world, their efforts should be respectful to the communities they seek to help, and properly guided in order for those efforts to have the greatest possible impact and chance of success.

But if you step back for a moment, it defies logic that someone should try to solve a problem they've never seen, or don't fully understand, from tens of thousands of miles away. It's hard to argue that they have the knowledge or qualifications – even the right – to attempt such an audacious feat. Yet that's precisely what's happening in many universities across much of the developed world multiple times each academic year. Students are being 'skilled up' in design thinking and global development issues, pointed to a few exciting new and emerging technologies, and told to fix something. Their primary purpose is to pass a course in most cases, which almost makes it worse.

WE SHOULD ONLY ASSUME WE'RE IN A BETTER POSITION TO HELP THE POOR THAN THEY ARE TO HELP THEMSELVES IF WE HAVE SOME PARTICULARLY COMPELLING REASON FOR THINKING SO -WILLIAM MACASKILL

Speaking at schools, colleges and universities around the world has been a big part of my work over recent years, and I always make a point of sharing emerging best practice when I do. My inbox is always open to students wanting

to share their ideas, or talk about how they might contribute to making the world a better place. A highlight was almost certainly a discussion in front of several hundred students with Archbishop Desmond Tutu a few years ago. I'm happy to connect, guide and mentor anyone with a good idea and even better intentions, and have even gone to the effort of editing two books to help share the stories of others who have gone about innovating in impactful and respectful ways.

At a time when we know we need to be building capacity among local innovators to start solving their own problems, it's tough to see so many outsiders continuing to take charge – students and tech-focused international development organisations among them. The developing world becomes a sand pit where people take and play out their ideas. It rarely turns out well for a whole number of reasons.

To help students think through what they're doing before they reach out for help, I've added a **Students** page to the kiwanja website. I hope it helps them think a little more about what they're doing, and why. There they can download a PDF of a checklist – made up of the same questions in my Donors Charter – to help them think through what they're doing and, more importantly why it's them doing it. I also hope teachers and lecturers make use of it, too. After all, in many cases it's them encouraging and supporting these students with their project ideas.

Let's start to put this right, one classroom at a time.

A CALL FOR SANITY – NOT INNOVATION – IN HUMANITARIAN TECH

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If you're a socially-focussed tech organisation working with refugees, it's been a pretty tough few months. Not only have you had to deal with the ever-growing number of people fleeing conflict – now at record levels – but you've had to deal with the politics of the 'humanitarian technology sector'.

For those who have been working with refugees for years, often with proven, well-thought out solutions, it must be frustrating to see call after call – through Challenges and Innovation Competitions and the like – for 'innovative new solutions' to the crisis. Not only is it madness to imply that every solution already out there isn't any good (which asking for new ones implicitly does), but it often sidelines the very organisations with the best background and experience – the ones best-placed to build the 'desperately needed stuff that works' that we need.

Can we agree to stop calling for 'innovative and new' solutions to every crisis, and commit to at least first looking at what currently exists? And, sure, if there is nothing then let's reach out and built something new.

Deal?

TIME FOR A TOP-DOWN BOTTOM-UP DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGE?

🔗

Earlier last week I stumbled into a post on Chris Blattman's website provocatively titled 'Is this the most effective development program in history?' It in, he shares the story of how, in 2011, the Nigerian government handed out $60 million to 1,200 Nigerians – that's about $50,000 each – to help them create, run and/or scale a business. "Three years later there are hundreds more new companies, generating tons of profit, and employing about 7,000 new people". Not bad for a reasonably modest amount of money.

Although I see this as more of an investment program rather than a development initiative, I come to similar conclusions to Chris. What if we channelled more funds to the middle and the bottom, and let market forces and entrepreneurialism in-country take over?

Today I read another post, this time on the Guardian development professionals network, which poses a not-too-dissimilar question. In 'Five reasons funding should go directly to local NGOs', Jennifer Lentfer – creator of how-matters.org and Director of Communications at International Development Exchange – argues that we should channel more funding directly to local innovators, NGOs and social entrepreneurs on the ground in developing countries. To put things in context, only about 1% of humanitarian aid goes directly to local actors in the global south at the moment. The rest goes through what Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah calls 'fundermediaries'. In other words, larger global development players who then 'trickle' it down (or so the theory goes).

Jennifer's call for more local funding is based on five key arguments:

1. While outsiders struggle with concepts such as 'community participation' and 'local empowerment', there are often "dedicated and embedded local partners who are working hard to understand and address their own problems" who do get it.

2. Local organisations, by their very nature, are intrinsic to the local communities they serve, and are part of the social fabric. They belong there, and are often more vested in developing meaningful, sustainable, long-lasting solutions.

3. The larger the (outside) institutions, the more funds they need to divert internally to sustain themselves and their staff, offices and operational budgets.

4. Most local institutions are free from the burden of annual reports, log frames and three year funding models meaning that many have greater staying power than outside, larger institutions who come and go based on a range of external factors.

5. There is proof, albeit in low quantities (because of the lack of direct funding at this level) that "grassroots grantees get results".

In a separate post, Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah shares five excuses donors give for not funding local NGOs directly. Among these are that local NGOs don't have the expertise or capacity to fill in all the forms; it is too expensive to administer the smaller grant amounts suitable for smaller organisations; that funds need to be channelled through 'trusted partners' to manage risk; money laundering and anti-terror rules make it hard to give to 'non-trusted partners'; and a pressure for funds to be put through organisations in their home country (i.e. organisations which, more often than not, are also in the global north).

I've been arguing for more direct support for local innovators, social actors and NGOs for well over a decade, so each of these posts resonated strongly. It has also been a central part of my argument that we build tools that local organisations can take and use on their own terms, again something I've been speaking about on the ICT4D circuit since 2003.

Of course, not all international NGOs are the same, and not all grassroots are the same, either. But if there's evidence that in certain circumstances local players have better chance of achieving a desired impact, often for less money, then it's right and proper that we investigate further.

So, how about a new **Development Challenge**, modelled on the same types of competition where investors start with the same amount of money (not real money, mind you) and aim to turn it into as much as they can within a fixed period of time? It would need to be a fairly long-term experiment, and it could go something along the lines of:

1. Identify half-a-dozen international 'fundermentaries'

2. identify half-a-dozen grassroots NGOs

3. Determine a modest starting budget – the same amount for each organisation

4. Allow them to dictate where and how they spend the money via a short proposal

5. Using an independent evaluator, take some baseline data based on (4)

6. Disburse the funds (real money in this case)

7. Come back in a predetermined period of time (at least three years)

8. Using an independent evaluator, carry out some monitoring and evaluation

Which projects are still running? What impact have they had? What changes have they helped facilitate? How sustainable are they? What changes have there been in the community? How did the approaches of the local organisations differ from the others? What conclusions can we draw from all of this?

We wouldn't have much to lose by trying out an experiment like this, but a whole lot to gain. Of course, if it was shown that grassroots designed and managed projects performed better, the international development community would have some awkward and difficult questions to answer.

And if the international community does better? Well, then it's just business as usual.

NEW IDEA? OR OLD IDEA DONE BETTER?

Last week I received my yearly mailing of Ashoka's inspiring 'Leading Social Entrepreneurs' publication. It's always fascinating flicking through the work and lives of some quite extraordinary individuals helping make their part of the world a better place.

At the end, it struck me how many solutions there were between the covers of the publication, and how many further answers were out there to the world's social and environmental ills. I also wondered what was happening with most of those ideas. Were they being implemented in single (or sometimes multiple) locations by single social innovators or organisations? Or had others taken those ideas and applied them where they lived and worked?

Philanthropy is always looking for new ideas, innovative ideas. I'd be surprised if we didn't have enough good answers already, and what we should instead be doing is encouraging others to use those rather than continually come up with new ones.
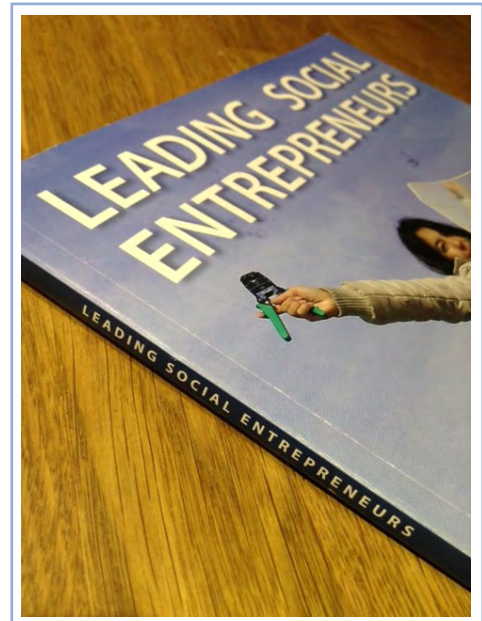
YOU MIGHT NOT CHANGE THE WORLD. BUT YOU CAN MAKE IT A BETTER PLACE.

One of the perks of my job is that I get to meet some of the most talented innovators and entrepreneurs from all over the world. I even get to mentor and support some of them. But they're the exception, not the rule. Not everyone who sets out to make the world a better place is going to come up with a new, groundbreaking, innovative idea that achieves their goal. Not everyone is going to end up running their own social venture. Not everyone is going to win prizes for their efforts, and not everyone is going to have huge, global impact.

And that's fine.

One of the most frequent questions I get asked, particularly at student events, is what young people can do to help make the world a better place. Many realise that the chances of becoming the next Muhammad Yunus are slim, and instead they look for something more achievable and realistic they can do.

During my time as a mentor with Unreasonable at Sea, I had the honour to sit on a panel with Archbishop Desmond Tutu in front of several hundred students hungry to find out how they could help make the world a better place. It was a wide-ranging conversation which you can see in full below. (The Archbishop later wrote the Foreword to my first book, The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator).

The advice that I always give can be broken down into four complimentary actions. These only work if done together.

1. Take an interest. Read widely. Watch documentaries. Make an effort to meet like-minded people. Take time to understand the world, to understand the context of the problems we face as a people and a planet.

2. Empathise. Take time to understand what life is like for those less fortunate than yourself. Try to spend time with them. Travel to the places they live if possible. Be open to learning. Empathy is key. Empathy + knowledge is invaluable.

3. Pick something big. Get behind a major global campaign that addresses a major global challenge. Don't let the enormity of the task put you off, or the fact that you may never know the impact you, individually, may have.

4. Pick something small. Get behind a local organisation addressing a local problem that you're passionate about. Volunteer your time. Get involved. See, experience and feel the impact you're having, and draw comfort that you're making a difference.

Most of the innovators I get to meet didn't come up with their ideas or solutions overnight. Many were already taking an interest, and spending time with the people they ended up helping. The most important lesson you can learn from this? If you immerse yourself, anything is possible.

THE CASE OF 'WE CARE SOLAR' AND OUR FAILURE TO SPOT WINNERS

🔗

*"The first ever US$1 million UN-DESA Energy Grant has been awarded to We Care Solar, a non-profit organisation, to enhance and expand the use of its 'Solar Suitcase'. By making solar power simple, accessible and affordable, this device allows for the provision of electricity for medical procedures during childbirth in many developing countries, helping to avoid life-threatening complications for mothers and children" – **UN website**

Yesterday afternoon at United Nations HQ in New York, Laura Stachel and her organisation, We Care Solar, picked up the inaugural UN-DESA award. It's the latest in a string of awards and accolades for a project I've known and admired for many years.

(Photo: We Care Solar)

I was already a fan of simple, appropriate technology solutions to problems before I met Laura in 2009. While almost everyone else at the time seemed to be aspiring to build complex tech solutions to often simple problems, the idea behind the Solar Suitcase was beautiful in its simplicity. It was based on a rather simple hypothesis: If the power (and therefore lighting) goes down in the middle of a difficult (or any) childbirth, and there's no backup, people can die. This is not just true of maternity wards in the developing world, where Laura first witnessed this happening. Try plunging any operating theatre anywhere in the world into darkness and see how the surgeons cope.

I always found the idea compelling, and always did what I could to help. Laura was as committed to ending these unnecessary deaths as anyone could be, and her determination was at times a source of frustration to her. She gave it everything, and taking it on changed her life. The fact she got so little support early on, despite the compelling nature of her work, was an injustice in my eyes, and another reason I always did what I could. It was another reason why I wanted to include her story in my recent book, "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator".

Why Laura was so committed was clear. From her Nigerian fieldwork (2008), quoted in the book:

> I had not predicted the challenges facing my Nigerian colleagues. At night, I observed maternity care, watching helplessly as doctors and midwives struggled to treat critically ill pregnant women in near-total darkness. The dim glow of kerosene lanterns often provided the only illumination. Without electricity, doctors had to postpone Caesarean sections and other life-saving procedures. When the maternity ward was in darkness, midwives were unable to provide emergency care and, on occasion, would turn patients away from the labour room door, despite their critical need for care.

The story of Laura's response, the Solar Suitcase, is not the rosy tale of social innovation and overnight success that many people hearing about her work for the first time yesterday might think it to be. Today, things might be going well but, as Laura will remind us, there's always more to be done, and women and children continue to die in the dark in wards the developing world over. It's obviously great news that, as a result of yesterdays award, that number will continue to decrease, but that level of support hasn't always been there, despite the compelling nature of what she was doing.

(Photo: We Care Solar)
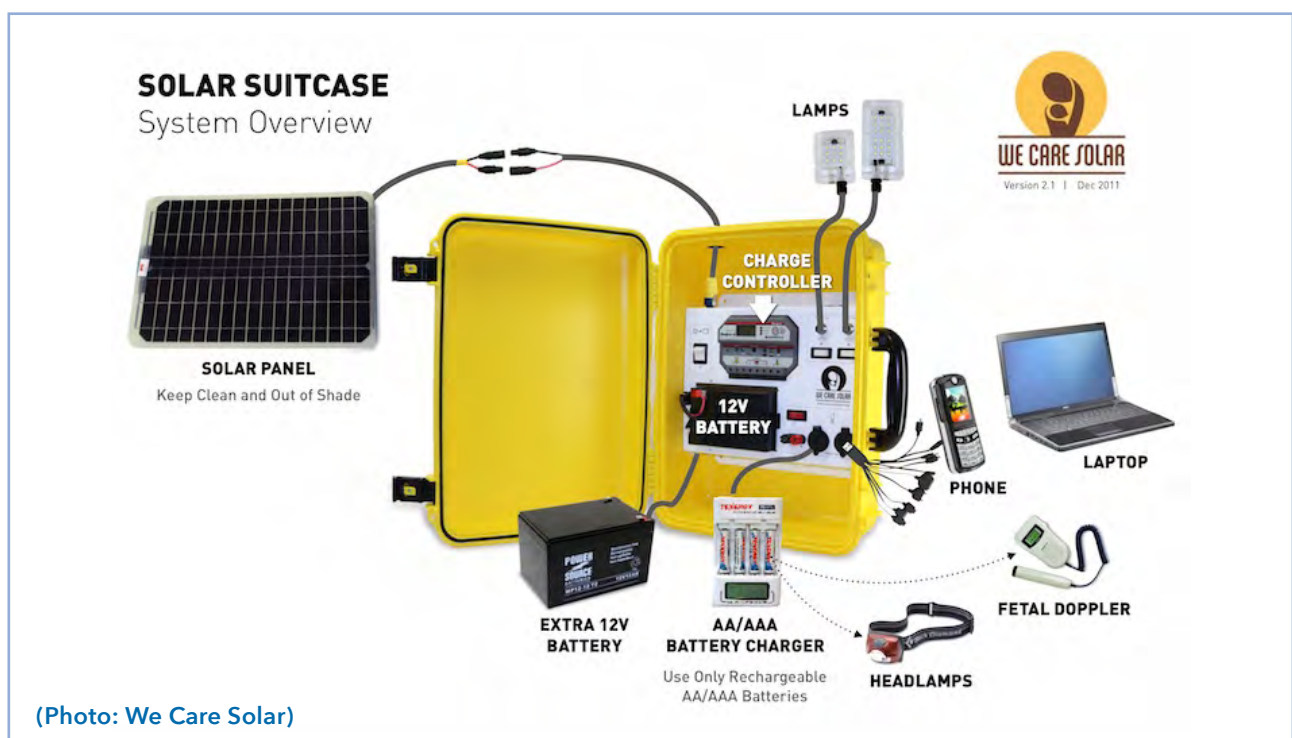
After that Nigerian trip in 2008, Laura and her partner, Hal, sketched out the early plans for the Solar Suitcase. That done, they needed money to build a prototype. A $12,500 competition at UC Berkeley looked like the perfect place to get it, but out of twelve finalists they didn't win. In her own words, Laura felt dejected and, worse, felt she'd let down colleagues in Nigeria who she had promised to help. But someone there believed in them. Thomas Kalil, a campus official who had been at the competition, called Laura up and told her they should have won. He committed to helping. Within three weeks he had pulled together $25,000 from The Blum Center for Developing Economies and Berkeley Big Ideas, and We Care Solar was born. Considerable challenges remained as the work progressed, and on numerous occasions anyone with less determination would have quit. There's nothing more deflating that having huge belief in what you're doing, only to find so few others who share it. If you want the real story behind what it means to innovate, read Laura's chapter. Trust me, it's worth it.

The story of We Care Solar is littered with opportunities for the official development sector to come on board. But on so many occasions it didn't. There could be many reasons for this. Perhaps the technology wasn't clever enough? Maybe donors didn't see the potential in what Laura was doing? Maybe they were too busy looking for the next big thing? Maybe all of the above?

Yesterday's award is proof that Laura was right sticking to her belief in the Solar Suitcase, despite the immense personal sacrifices that involved. And we should be grateful that she did. We talk a lot in the development sector about 'picking winners' and the 'need to support things that work'. But that clearly didn't happen here. Until now. How many Laura's are out there who don't battle through, who call it a day on potentially life-changing ideas because they can't get the support they need? Or, worse, because they are constantly rejected?

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but what's not compelling about giving light to maternity wards in the developing world? What's not compelling about wanting to stop women and babies dying in the dark? And why did it take so long to help someone fix it?

LONE INNOVATORS OF THE WORLD UNITE

Conventional wisdom among much of the investor community might have you believe that only projects borne out of teams have the potential to succeed. People that work alone are an awkward fit. Maybe they're considered anti-social, giving a sign that they're not able (or willing) to work with others? Or they're considered too introvert?

Perhaps building a team is part of the investor pre-investment test? "The evidence is in everywhere that great innovation comes from collaborating" is what we're lead to believe.

Ken Banks @kiwanja   + Follow

If many of the greatest innovators of our time preferred to work alone, why do so many investors insist on only investing in teams?

5:06 AM - 14 Aug 2015

I've previously written about the need to invest more in people, not just projects. It's now just a case of extending that argument from 'people' to 'person'.

If you're looking for evidence that introverts aren't all that bad (or rare) – and I guess many lone founders might be rightly (or wrongly) grouped in that category – then Susan Cain's Quiet is a brilliant place to start:

> *The introvert/extrovert divide is the most fundamental dimension of personality. And at least a third of us are on the introverted side. Some of the world's most talented people are introverts. Without them we wouldn't have the Apple computer, the theory of relativity and Van Gogh's sunflowers.*

After spending most of my early career in the mobile-for-development field as a lone non-profit technology founder, quite successfully I'd like to think, these past few months I've been learning the ropes in the commercial sector as I build out a new mobile app idea. The difference in approach is quite something

– that's something for a longer, future blog post – but the focus on market opportunity and business models feature strongly, as does the need to be in a team. This from a programme I was looking at just last week – the Barclays Accelerator:

Frequently asked questions

General overview

What types of businesses is the Barclays Accelerator focusing on? ∨

How are the final 10 companies chosen? What are the criteria? ∧

The Barclays Accelerator is looking for great founders with ideas that solve real problems or create meaningful innovations. For us, it's about the team and because of this, we're less likely to accept single founder companies. The best things you can do to strengthen your application are:

- Round out your team with business, technical, and other necessary skills.
- Make progress on your prototype or product and reference it in the application.
- Show us you've really thought about your business and have actually done something about it.

Your team must be capable of designing your solution and be ready to launch by the end of the 13-week programme. We are looking for impressive teams with an ability to execute.

I suppose I could always drop my app idea for a while and spend huge amounts of time bringing a bunch of other people on-board. Or I could not do that, and just look for investors who don't mind lone innovators. They do exist – I found one. And they invested.

> *No matter how brilliant your mind or strategy, if you're playing a solo game, you'll always lose out to a team* – **Reid Hoffman, Co-Founder of LinkedIn**

I don't dispute that, ultimately, you'll need a team to build out your idea. My argument is simply that it might be after you've started building, and after you know your idea has legs. Focus relentlessly on the product first.

After all, no product, no business, no (need for a) team.

WHY PLANNING ISN'T EVERYTHING: EMBRACING SERENDIPITY, CHANCE AND LUCK IN THE PURSUIT OF SOCIAL CHANGE 🔗

Each year, hundreds – if not thousands – of engaged students walk through the doors of schools, colleges and universities around the world eager to learn the art of social change. But is this the best approach? Does turning social entrepreneurship into an academic discipline give out the right message?

Classes in social innovation, social entrepreneurship and design thinking have become increasingly popular in recent years. On the one hand, this might be seen as a good thing. After all, the world needs as many smart, engaged citizens as it can get, particularly when you consider the multitude of challenges we face as a planet. But does a career in social change really begin in the classroom, or out in the real world? How much social change is planned, and how much accidental? And which approach tends to lead to the most meaningful, lasting or impactful solutions? These questions, which have occupied my mind for some time, are the ones I tackled in my recent book, "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator".

In our desperation to explain and control the world around us we put things in boxes, label them up and then study them to death. We look for the 'secret sauce' in successful ideas while trying to break down the characters and personalities of the people behind them. Finding the next Steve Jobs becomes an obsession. Books on social innovation abound, as if making the world a better place was a ten-step process which, if followed vigorously, will guarantee us meaningful change. I'm sure I'm not alone, but my experience of social innovation isn't anything like this. Instead, I see serendipity, luck and chance play a bigger part than we dare admit. Of course that said, it's what people do with their chance encounter that matters, not the chance discovery itself, as Scott Berkun reminds us in his best-selling book, *The Myths of Innovation*.

In *The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator*, all ten people featured took their chance. And what makes their stories even more interesting is that, in most cases, they weren't even looking for anything to solve. The thing that ended up taking over their lives found *them*.

Brij Kothari, for example, who conceived the idea behind a subtitling tool while eating pizza, which is today helping hundreds of millions of Indian children. Joel Selanikio whose frustration at a lack of reliable health information drove

(Photo: Planet Read)

him to develop a mobile data collection tool. Laura Stachel, who developed solar-powered suitcases for maternity wards after seeing mothers and babies die in the dark on Nigerian wards. Or Sharon Terry, who took on a genetic disease after a shock diagnosis that her children were sufferers.

In something of a break from conventional wisdom, in the majority (but not all) of these cases the innovators were far from qualified to take on the challenge. In a sense, they did things in reverse by encountering a problem which troubled them, and then picked up the skills they needed to rectify it as they went. This is a very different approach to the one taught in the classroom, which sees engaged young millennials taught the art of pitching, business modelling and design thinking before they're unleashed on the world in search of a problem.

It's also a very different approach to the one carried out by the international development community which has, over the past six decades, burnt its way through over $3 trillion in its efforts to rid the world of its social and environmental ills (causing a few of its own along the way, I'd hasten to add). The sector has effectively institutionalised development, professionalising it and making it

> AFTER 60 YEARS AND $3 TRILLION OF DEVELOPMENT AID, WITH ONE BIG PUSH FOLLOWING ANOTHER AND WAVE AFTER WAVE OF THEORIES AND JARGON, THERE IS DEPRESSINGLY LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT AID HAS ANY SIGNIFICANT BENIGN EFFECT ON THIRD-WORLD POVERTY
> -JONATHAN FOREMAN

almost inaccessible to ordinary people, including the kind of talent featured in the book.

Of course, it would be hard to justify spending any amount of money in the hope that you'd get lucky, or get that chance encounter with an innovative solution or idea. So what can we do to increase our chances of it happening?

A few tips from the book:

1. Be curious and inquisitive. Ask questions. Take nothing for granted.

2. Take time to understand the world. It's complicated.

3. Leave your comfort zone. Spend time with the people you're trying to help.

4. Don't assume you can fix anything. Sit, listen, observe.

5. Be patient. Remember this is a life-long journey, not a three month project.

Finally, work on something that gets you out of bed in the morning (and that will continue to do so for years to come). Make it something that switches you on, that fuels your passion. This is probably most crucial. Howard Thurman was spot on. *"Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who come alive"*.

ICT4D STUDENTS: THE WORLD IS YOUR CLASSROOM 🔗

It seems courses in business and innovation are getting a hard time these days. First, Peter Jones, a 49-year-old serial entrepreneur in the UK, said he believed that hands-on experience was far more valuable to potential business leaders than several years studying theory in a lecture theatre. Then we had the likes of Peter Thiel, Scott Cook and Elon Musk telling us they believed business school graduates were hurting, rather than helping, innovation.

If we're overstating the role of education in entrepreneurship and innovation, are we doing the same with social innovation and ICT4D?

Most people working in technology-for-development seem to agree the field isn't in the best of health, with a whole range of problems persisting since the birth of the discipline decades ago. We have a constant stream of books telling us how we're failing, without anything really changing. The technology toolkit expands and shifts, sure, but the difficulties we have in applying and implementing it stays the same. Is the way we're 'teaching people to do ICT4D' part of the problem?

(Photo: edsi.org.uk)
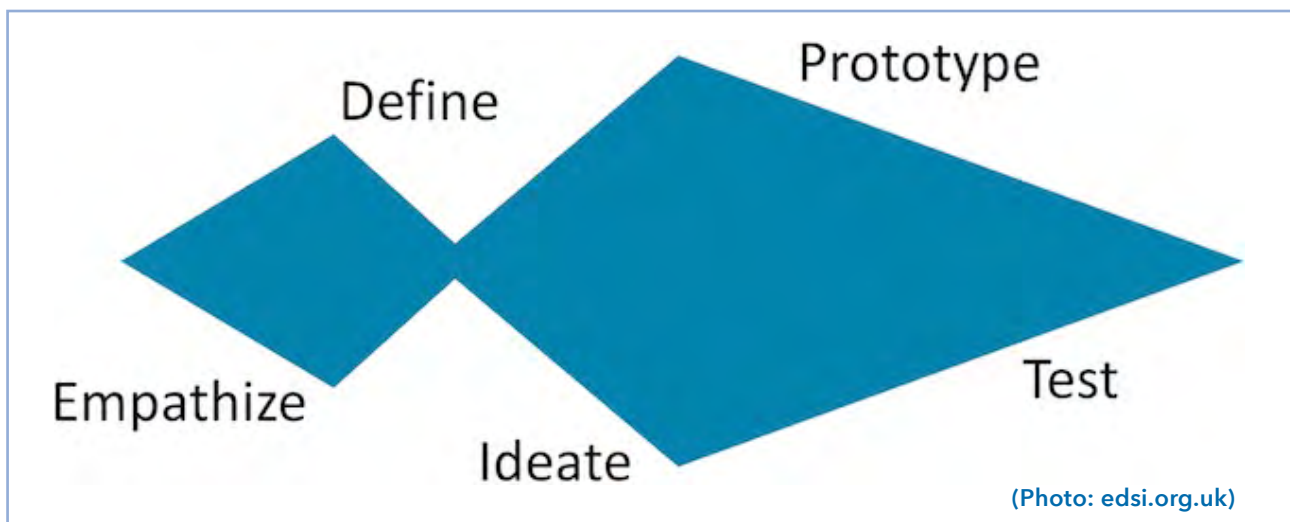
In The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator, I shared my concerns with what I saw as **the institutionalisation of social change** (which includes the broader global development and technology-for-development fields). The essence of the book began to develop during my time at Stanford University where I became increasingly exposed to social entrepreneurship, social innovation and design thinking as academic disciplines. I found myself meeting increasing numbers of smart young people looking to colleges and universities to equip them with the skills they felt they needed to 'go out and change the world'.

I was a bit taken aback. You didn't need qualifications to change the world, did you? Often I'd dig deeper and ask what they wanted to do when they graduated. Answers such as 'I want to be a social entrepreneur' perplexed me. Few people I know in the messy, often frustrating world of social entrepreneurship ever set out with the explicit aim of becoming one. Rather, they stumbled across a problem, a wrong or a market inefficiency which bothered them to such an extent that they decided to dedicate much – if not all – of their lives to putting it right. It was rarely, if ever, part of a wider plan.

Many of the students I met were unlikely to experience that problem, wrong, injustice or market inefficiency within the walls of their college or university. And, worse, many had never even stepped foot in the villages and communities they were aspiring to help. I agree that teaching the mechanics of social innovation or ICT4D may be helpful, yes, but only if matched with passion, and a cause, to which people can apply it, and genuine experience and empathy with – and for – the people you wish to help.

What I was witnessing at Stanford, and almost everywhere I have been since, was the increasing institutionalisation of social entrepreneurship and social innovation. This is unhelpful on many fronts, not to mention that it could easily be seen as a barrier by many motivated young people unable to take a course. Worse still, it implied that social change was a well- thought out process, when in reality it isn't.

In ICT4D we're so fixed on the technology – the ICT bit – that we often forget the 'D' – that minor inconvenience we call 'development'. Fewer and fewer people seem to be making the effort to teach or learn the D, and this is a huge problem. It's almost arrogant, and certainly disrespectful, to imply you can help people far far away you have never spoken to, and whose country, let alone village, you have never been to.

The first thing we should be teaching ICT4D students is development – the state of the world, how we got there, and what it means for the billions of people who for no fault of their own are on the receiving end of a life in poverty. Sure, getting on a plane and actually going somewhere for a few months (longer ideally) is difficult. But that's no excuse for not doing it. For people who can't, there are likely many problems in their own communities they could turn their attention to.

If we're to fix ICT4D then the best place to start is by properly educating the ICT4D practitioners of tomorrow. If we don't then little will change, and change is what we need.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT R&D: MAINTAINING A BALANCE 🔗

My first brush with technology-for-development, almost twenty years ago, wasn't on the potential of the Internet, or how mobile phones were going to change, well, everything. To be honest, neither were really on the development radar in any meaningful way back then. It's almost funny to imagine a time when that was the case.

No, my first contact with what was to become a career in ICT4D started off with an essay on the failure of plough and cook stove projects across Africa. I was struck by the beauty of simple, locally appropriate solutions and amazed at how development experts just didn't seem (or want) to get it. Many of their failed initiatives seemed more like a reaction against them – that, as experts, they were expected to come out with something the opposite of simple, primitive, practical. This they did, but very little of it ever worked.

It was around this time that I also came across the work of E. F. Schumacher and his brilliant 1973 book, Small is Beautiful. The lessons in his book apply just as much today in a world dominated by digital technologies – a world he would never have imagined back then. World Watch magazine interviewed me a few years ago on why his appropriate technology ethos was just as relevant today. It's well worth a read.
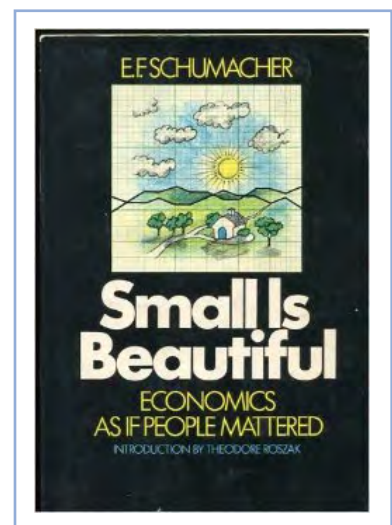
Our obsession with the latest shiny technology hasn't gone away, either. History repeats itself and, despite being armed with a range of tools and solutions that work, experts still appear to rebel against them because they're digitally too simple, primitive or practical. And, again, many of their alternative 'innovative' solutions simply don't work.

Sure, there needs to be a degree of emphasis on new tools, new solutions, new ways of tackling old problems. This – the R&D side of the development machine – is essential but it needs to be kept in balance. The average R&D spend among top UK companies in a recent survey was 5%. No company in its right mind would spend most of its money on research and development and ignore its bread and butter, namely its current products and services, and current customers.

How about the global development sector make a commitment to spend, say, 5% of its funding on blue sky, high tech, high risk forward-looking ideas, and commit the rest to funding the really simple, primitive, appropriate solutions we already have that are

proven to work? 5% of global development spending is still a few billion dollars, more than enough to invest in the next big thing.
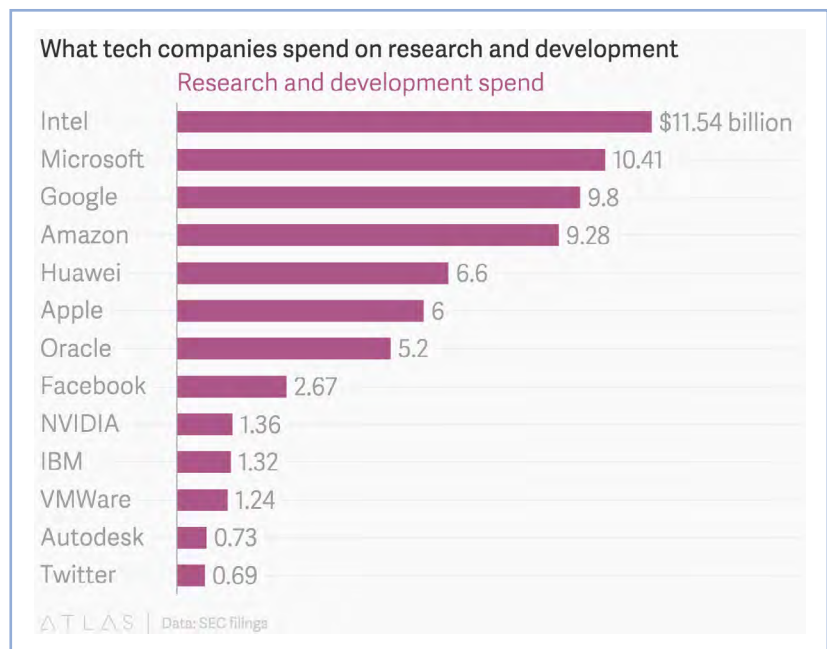
And how about it pool these funds and create a single Global Development R&D Fund? A better coordinated approach might result in better outcomes, and it could better manage its external communications. The amount available would compare quite favourably with R&D spends of the bigger tech companies (source: Atlas)

The 95:5 Rule

■ R&D
■ Core activities

5% of annual global development spend on R&D (a hefty $7 billion)

95% of annual global development spend on core, proven, working activities (approximately $160 billion)
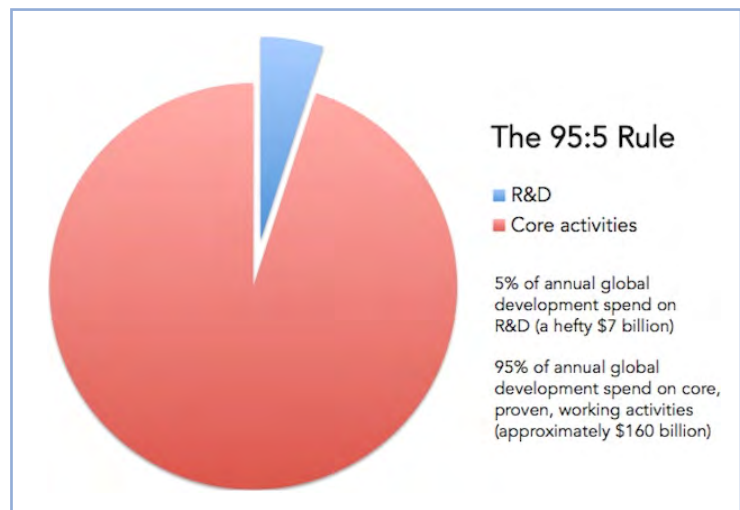
Right now, with an increasing big data, drones and wearables obsession (among others), you get the sense that global development R&D lacks coordination and spends too much of its time, energy, focus and resources on high-risk ideas. While it toys around with the next big thing people are going to bed hungry, dying of treatable diseases, at school with no pens or books, or drinking polluted water. All of these things can be put right with the technologies we possess today, but they're not. I've never understood why. We should only allow ourselves the luxury of looking to the future once we've fixed the solvable problems of the present.

While the development community needs to naturally look ahead, it also needs to remember the people suffering today, those who might not be around to reap the benefits of any cool drone, big data or wearable solution of the future. Every life matters, after all. You get a sense that in the development space, R&D spending is way out of control as it feeds its obsession with cool, shiny and innovative.

What tech companies spend on research and development
Research and development spend

Company	Spend
Intel	$11.54 billion
Microsoft	10.41
Google	9.8
Amazon	9.28
Huawei	6.6
Apple	6
Oracle	5.2
Facebook	2.67
NVIDIA	1.36
IBM	1.32
VMWare	1.24
Autodesk	0.73
Twitter	0.69

ATLAS | Data: SEC filings

So let's keep that R&D budget in check, be more open with how much is being spent on speculative new ideas which may go nowhere, and make sure we don't forget our bread and butter – our current (working) products and services, and our current customers – the poor, marginalised and vulnerable out there who, through no fault of their own, desperately need our help. Today.
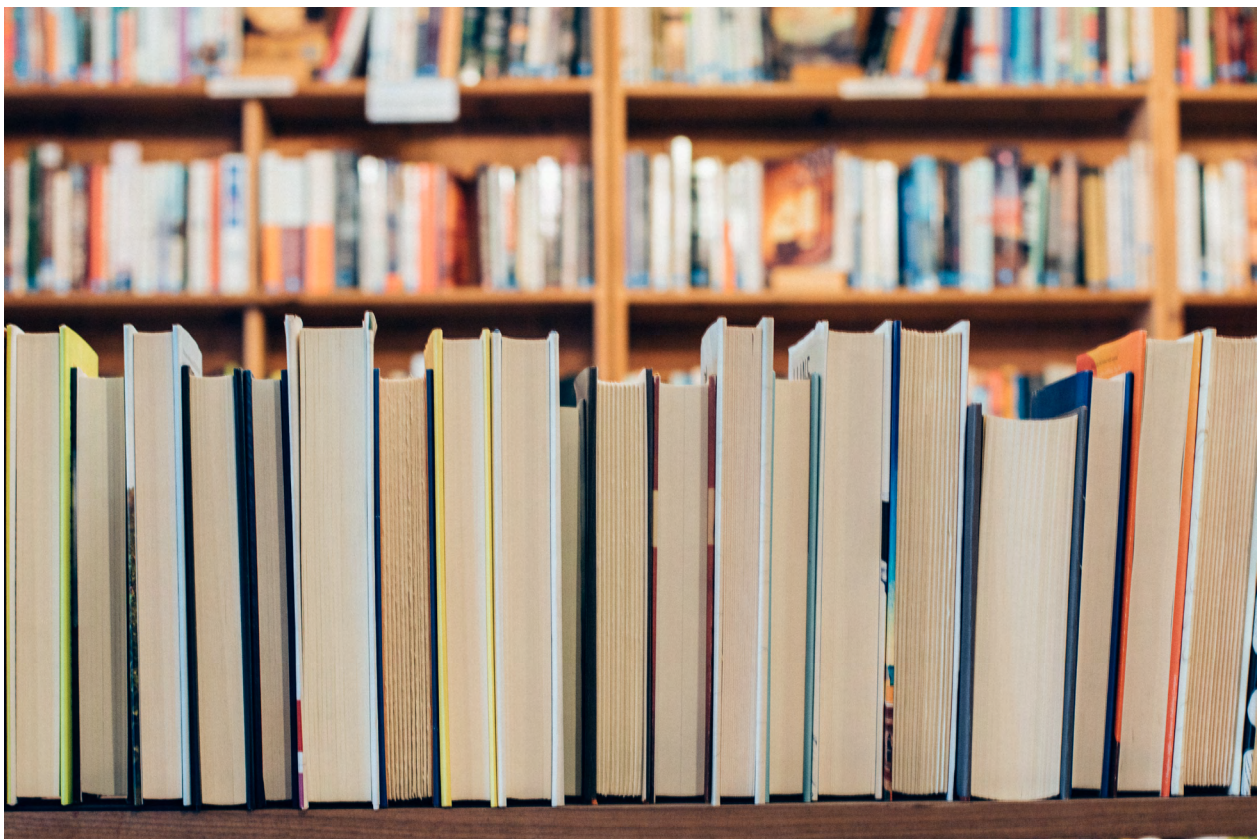
IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT, IS THE PEN MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD?

🔗

I'm reading two books in parallel right now – **Ben Ramalingam**'s 'Aid on the Edge of Chaos' and **Kentaro Toyama**'s 'Geek Heresy'. With both books I'm finding myself regularly pausing for a nod of approval or a wry smile. Both books are spot on in their identification of the issues – Ben in global development more broadly, and Kentaro in ICT4D, a sector/field/discipline/specialism of global development.

A while back when **Bill Easterly** published his 'Tyranny of Experts' I started to wonder what impact his previous book – 'The White Man's Burden' – has had on the practice and policy of global development. I have the same question for **Dambisa Moyo**, too, whose 'Dead Aid' is another classic development critique. Both provide strong arguments for a new aid world order (or, more to the point, no aid at all).

Suffice to say, if you're not a fan or supporter of big development there are countless books out there to feed your anger, frustration and despair. But for all the hundreds of billions of words written over the past decade or two citing

the challenges, problems and issues, have any forced any kind of change in how those hundreds of billions of Pounds, Dollars or Euros of development aid were spent? Almost everyone I meet who works in big development has at least one major frustration with it – many have several – but the one that drives me to despair the most is that no-one seems to be able to change anything.

I published 'The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator' because I wanted to help steer young social innovators away from expensive university courses and encourage them to firstly get out into the world, meet the people they wanted to help, gain some empathy, and find their passion. I can't speak for Ben or Kentaro, but they probably hope something might improve as a result of their writing efforts, too.

I spent the best part of three years as an undergraduate at Sussex University in the late 1990's writing about how rubbish development was. That's what undergraduates do. Of course, it's not all bad, but many of the problems I studied 20 years ago persist. That's my problem.

I thoroughly recommend all of the books Ben, Kentaro, Bill and Dambisa have written. Oh, and of course, mine. And if nothing changes, at least you'll have had a good read.

THE "TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT" OF ICT4D

During a rare, quiet, bored few minutes last week I looked through a few early blog posts from some of the longer standing members of the ICT4D community. Between around 2012 and now, many of the same statements, proclamations and questions have come up time and time and time again. The same tweets with the same outcome – usually nothing. Many have regularly appeared on my blog over the past seven or eight years, too, without making the slightest bit of difference.

I recently wrote about the need to stop just meeting up and repeating ourselves in the ICT4D echo chamber, which is what has been happening. But suffice to say it continues, and likely will, for as long as the discipline survives. The most obvious impact of all this activity are tweets and retweets of surprise every time something is said, even if it has been said for the past five years. If we're looking to keep ourselves in a job and not fix anything, this isn't a bad strategy, I suppose.

Here's just a few of the things we've been saying over and over again for years.

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #1
"THERE ARE FAR TOO MANY PILOTS IN ICT4D, AND TOO MANY FAIL OR FAIL TO GO TO SCALE"

Okay, so no more pilots. Let's put an end to 'pilotitus'. Other than talking, what are we going to do about it, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #2
"INITIATIVES THAT WORK NEED TO BE REPLICATED AND SCALED"

Okay, after decades of trying we have done some stuff right. So how do we identify the stuff that works and genuinely support that? Other than talking, what are we going to do about it, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #3
"WE NEED TO STOP THE CONSTANT REINVENTING OF WHEELS"

Yup. The world doesn't need any more data collection tools or SMS gateways. So how do we put an end to this constant replication and reinvention? Other than talking, what are we going to do about it, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #4
"HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND AND MEASURE OUR IMPACT?"

In many cases it's still unclear who should pay to do monitoring and evaluation. Donors seem to think grantees should do it, and grantees only seem prepared to do it if the donor has given money for it. Other than talking, how are we going to fix this, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #5
"WE NEED TO INVOLVE MORE LOCAL PEOPLE IN THE DESIGN OF OUR TOOLS AND SERVICES"

Hallelujah. After years of ignoring the end user we're now entering an age (in ICT4D and global conservation and development, more broadly) where we think it's a good idea to be consulting our end user. But it still doesn't happen as much as it should. What are we going to do about it, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

TWEET. RECYCLE. REPEAT. #5
"WE NEED TO INVOLVE MORE LOCAL PEOPLE IN THE DESIGN OF OUR TOOLS AND SERVICES"

Everyone loves talking about appropriate technologies, but then they go off and build iPad apps for African farmers. We need to lead with the problem and the people, not the technology. But other than saying this, what are we going to do about it, precisely? And how can we enforce it?

When it comes to talking, blogging and tweeting 'best practice', I'm as guilty as the next person. We all do it, and we all rightly believe in what we're saying. But

talk is cheap if we do something very different on the ground (or do nothing at all). And after 12 years working in ICT4D/m4d I seem to keep seeing the same questions and issues raised over and over again. I'm sure I'm right when I say we all want to do the best we can for the people we serve. If we're under performing then that's something we all should naturally want to address.

Of course it's pretty easy to rant about how bad things are, but that's little use if you don't offer any solutions. I've been trying to do more of that lately, publishing a book – The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator – to challenge conventional wisdom around how social innovation happens and should be done. I also launched the Donors Charter which seemed to stir up all sorts of trouble, breaking the SSIR commenting system in the process. Check out the Stanford Social Innovation Review post if you've got a couple of hours spare.

The Charter, in short, proposed (quite logically in my mind) that if donors largely control what gets funded, all they needed to do was ask potential grantees a few simple questions before they handed over their money. We could then put a stop to some of the repetitive bad practice that we see. Donors all sign up to the Charter, and enforce it among themselves.

Of course, whether anything like this gets adopted is out of my control. But at least it's a possible solution, not a rant.

Passions often get fired up in these kinds of debate, and it's wonderful to see so much of it around ICT4D and m4d, particularly on how we can move the disciplines forward. But if the people and organisations with teeth in the non-profit sector aren't in the room, and don't act, then nothing will ever change. Perhaps everyone is too comfortable with how things are, and perhaps people don't really want change.

Or perhaps we're only comfortable with disruption as long as it doesn't happen to us. Tweet that.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT: INVESTORS IN PEOPLE?

🔗

We hear it all the time. Investors invest in people, not products or ideas. Marty Zwilling, a veteran start-up mentor, describes people as the great competitive advantage. I wonder what the non-profit world might learn from people like him?

The vast majority, if not all, non-profit foundations and donors are project-focused. In contrast to many angel and traditional investors, they're primarily interested in the products and ideas. It doesn't matter too much who has them, as the hundreds of online development competitions and challenges testify. These investments in products and ideas, however helpful and generous they may be, almost always miss one key thing – investment in the *person*.

I've long been an admirer of the MacArthur Foundation. They were first out of the traps when FrontlineSMS began to get serious traction in 2007, and became its first donor later that summer. And yes, they invested in the product. For others not so lucky to get funding from them, MacArthur are better known for their Fellows Program, or "MacArthur Genius grants".

Each year, the Foundation names around twenty-five Fellows who receive a no-strings-attached gift of $625,000 paid over five years. Crucially, the Fellowship is not a reward for past accomplishment, but an investment in a person's originality, insight, and future potential. What it does, in many cases, is free up the individual financially – pays off a mortgage, covers school fees, living expenses and so on – giving the Fellow total freedom to take risks, be bold, and to pursue their dreams and future work without limitation.

In short, the purpose of the Program is to "enable recipients to exercise their own creative instincts for the benefit of human society".

MacArthur Fellows are a broad-based bunch. In 2014 they added a physicist, a cartoonist and graphic memoirist, a lawyer, a composer, an engineer, a saxophonist and a poet among others to their cohort. It's the breadth of the award, the many different disciplines it touches, which makes the Program so inspiring and effective. The only restriction is that all Fellows need to be residents or citizens of the United States.

I can't help but wonder what the non-profit sector might achieve with a similar approach. Imagine if a large, private Foundation picked half-a-dozen people working in global development – people with a track record of vision, thought-leadership and execution working and living anywhere in the world – and supported them in a similar way? Imagine being able to free up some of the greatest minds – conventional and unconventional – to imagine and deliver their own vision of development into the future? Freeing them up financially would, in the same way as the MacArthur Fellowship, allow them to be bold and brave with their ideas, and in the same way "enable recipients to exercise their own creative instincts for the benefit of human society". Isn't benefiting human society, in essence, what the non-profit world is all about?

A Program like this could have significant impact, and the costs would be minimal in the grand scheme of things. It could unleash projects, products and ideas – which might not have materialised otherwise – from people who have already shown they can deliver. And it would give a clear signal that people matter, and acknowledge that people drive change, not ideas.

In a blog post from 2009, I talk about the need to inspire and support the very best in our field. We'll only tackle some of the bigger problems facing us if we do:

> *In the mobile world we talk a lot about project sustainability, but little about human sustainability. If we're to have any chance of ongoing success then we need to attract the brightest young minds to the "mobile for development" field, and then give them all the support they need to keep them there.*

A private Foundation, or group of Foundations, should find it easy enough to pool a few million dollars each year to develop a "Global Development Fellows

Program" to support a dozen or so of the best leaders and thinkers in the field. I know from my own experience, as I transition from a relatively 'free' period in my professional life to one where my priorities now lie much closer to home, how much a Program like this would positively impact my ability to continue to push the boundaries in my own work.

Things may be a little too late for me, assuming I was ever considered worthy enough for such an award, but it would be my hope that it won't be too late for others. I already see many talented people 'selling out', moving into the corporate world or finding a changing 'work/life' balance a challenge.

Global development can't afford to keep losing people like this. If it really does want to be seen to be innovative, and really is serious about tackling some of the biggest problems facing the planet today, recognising the need to do a little more "investing in people" – and then doing it – would be the best signal yet.

HOW "DESIGNING WITH THE END USER" UNDERMINES ICT4D BEST PRACTICE 🔗

After years of near-invisible end users, it's promising to see the beginnings of 'end-user recognition' in much of ICT4D's emerging best practice. It looks like we've made a big stride forward, but we're not where we need to be yet, despite making all the right noises. To a great extent, we're still saying one thing and doing another.

The international development sector, which includes the ICT4D community, is famously uncoordinated. That's no surprise to many of the people who work in it. You would hope that, at least if the wrong things were being done they'd be being done in a coordinated way, but that's rarely the case. Haiti is a great case in point, where "a confused aid effort' has only added to the difficulties. You'd be right to ask why so many people continue to live in tents nearly five years after the earthquake.

Ken Banks
@kiwanja

In the development sector, when are we going to move away from "Design with the user" to "Allow the user to design"? #globaldev #ICT4D #m4d

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Very recently, the Narrative Project - which I blogged about recently - included a call for "a co-ordinated development sector". It also made the point that independence and self-reliance, i.e. people in the developing world solving their own problems, should be key development objectives. And that people need to *believe* they can make a difference. This is good to hear, but they're empty words if 'best' practice continues to undermine it.

You could argue that "designing with the user" is a sensible approach – it's certainly better than designing without them – but is it taking us closer to an end-game of "people in the developing world solving their own problems"? It may if you're working with them to build a tool or platform which they, and other communities elsewhere, can then take and subsequently deploy on their own terms to solve whatever problem they see fit, in whatever way they decide, without the 'solution' provider needing to be involved.

To me, "Design with the user" makes more sense to a *local* solutions developer, who can simply jump on a bus to go and work with them. But it doesn't for the overseas solutions developer, for example the student group designing an ICT4D intervention as part of their design thinking course. Local empowerment can only genuinely happen if it's local people helping local people. So what we need to do is work towards a place where that can happen. "Allowing the user to design" is that place.

The truth of the matter is that far too many ICT4D projects are still initiated from the outside. When I initially launched FrontlineSMS in 2005, the platform was squarely designed to allow local people to conceive, design and run their own projects. The only outside help they needed was for someone to provide something that allowed them to do that. It really isn't rocket science.

Yet, despite its successes, it still seems to be a model, and an approach, in the minority.

I worry that people who read, study and follow the "Design with the end user" mantra might feel more than ever that they're doing the right thing, but they'll simply be reinforcing the outside-in, top down approach without realising it. "Design with the end user" is a step in the right direction, but it's not the end of the journey, and we shouldn't kid ourselves that it is.

TIME FOR A DONOR FUNDING CHARTER?

"Innovation isn't about green bean bags and whacky idea sessions. It is a long term business development strategy" **Lucy Gower**

Behind almost every good social entrepreneur you'll find a donor. These donors come in all shapes and sizes – family members, friends, companies, CSR departments and sponsors are the most typical, increasingly followed by the crowd funders among us. While plenty of great things get funded, pretty crazy stuff does, too. Zack Danger Brown just raised $55,000 on Kickstarter to make a potato salad, for example.
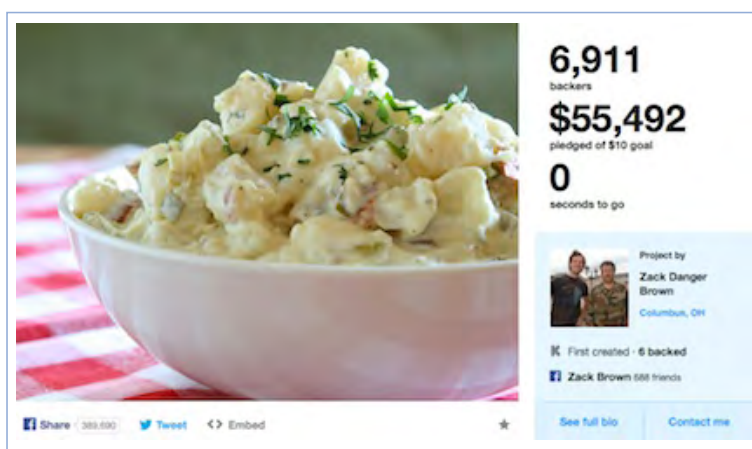
More often than not, the really big bucks come from government and philanthropic foundations. The UK's Department for International Development will hand out £10.765 billion this financial year, funding all manner of projects that help those in greatest need. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the biggest private foundation in the world, gave $3.6 billion last year. The world has plenty of problems – big problems – and these budgets reflect that. Donors get to choose which ones they fix, too. The Rockefeller Foundation, for example, currently focuses on resilient cities, digital jobs in Africa, food security, gender equality and universal health coverage, among a few others.

Donors also pay attention to what other donors do, and to what and who they fund. They love, for example, the idea of matched funding where two or more will put in an equal share of funds for a project. It spreads the risk, and gives them all comfort that they've not made a silly decision. If the project is good enough for someone else's money, it's good enough for theirs. Getting funded by one of the bigger foundations often makes it easier to get money from the others – a sort of shared due diligence, if you like.

Despite all the money and resources – and attempts to apply them to all manner of projects and initiatives – problems remain. During my "Rise of the Reluctant Innovator" book talks, I draw on some of the bigger challenges and failures of international development. Yes, a lot of good work has been done, but I often wonder if we're getting value for money. Over the past 60 years, we've sure spent a huge amount of it.

Plenty of things have been tried, and continue to be tried. Much of the failure is put down to the people and projects (who in turn often blame the target communities), but in many cases responsibility also needs to fall on the people who backed them. Under pressure to support 'innovative' (often crazy) ideas, and often under pressure to spend their large budgets, Programme Officers often resort to funding projects they shouldn't be going anywhere near.

> AFTER 60 YEARS AND $3 TRILLION OF DEVELOPMENT AID, WITH ONE BIG PUSH FOLLOWING ANOTHER AND WAVE AFTER WAVE OF THEORIES AND JARGON, THERE IS DEPRESSINGLY LITTLE EVIDENCE THAT OFFICIAL DEVELOPMENT AID HAS ANY SIGNIFICANT BENIGN EFFECT ON THIRD-WORLD POVERTY
>
> -JONATHAN FOREMAN

What we end up with is a sector full of replication, small-scale (failed) pilots, secrecy and near-zero levels of collaboration. This negatively impacts not only other poorly-planned initiatives, but it also complicates things for the better ones. On top of all that, it confuses the end user who is expected to make sense of all 75 mobile data collection tools that end up on offer. The policy of funding many in the hope that the odd one shines through – the so-called *"let a thousand flowers bloom"* scenario – belongs to an earlier era. Today, we know enough about what works and what doesn't to be far more targeted in what is funded and supported.

Given the vast majority of projects would never get started without some form of funding, donors are the ideal position to put this right. So here's my proposal.

All major philanthropic foundations – and, where appropriate, government development/aid agencies – sign up to a **Funding Charter** which encourages much greater scrutiny of the technology projects they're considering funding. This Charter will be available online, offering considerably more transparency for projects looking for money.

In the first instance, project owners will need to answer the following questions before their grant application is considered:

Preliminary questions

1. Do you understand the problem? Have you seen, experienced or witnessed the problem? Why are you the one fixing it?

2. **Does anything else exist that might solve the problem? Have you searched for existing solutions?**

3. Could anything that you found be adapted to solve the problem?

4. **Have you spoken to anyone working on the same problem? Is collaboration possible? If not, why not?**

5. Is your solution economically, technically and culturally appropriate?

Implementation questions

1. Have you carried out base research to understand the scale of the problem before you start?

2. **Will you be working with locally-based people and organisations to carry out your implementation? If not, why not?**

3. Are you making full use of the skills and experience of these local partners? How?

Evaluation and post-implementation questions

1. How do you plan to measure your impact? How will you know if your project was a success or not?

2. **Do you plan to scale up or scale out that impact? If not, why not? If yes, how?**

3. What is your business/sustainability model?

Transparency questions

1. Are you willing to have your summary project proposal, and any future summary progress reports, posted on the Donors Charter website for the benefit of transparency and more open sharing?

Not being able to answer these questions fully and reasonably needn't be the difference between funding or no funding – donors would be allowed wildcards – but it would serve two purposes. First, it would force implementers to consider key issues before reaching out for support, resulting in a reinforcement of best practice. And second, it will help the donors themselves by focusing their resources and dollars on projects which are better thought out and less likely to fail.

The simple adoption of this kind of Charter might do more to solve many of the niggling problems we regularly write, talk, complain and moan about in the ICT4D sector. Any takers?

A more concise version of the proposal is available on the dedicated Donors Charter website.

FIELD OF DREAMS

🔗

Two years ago this summer, long-time friend Erik Hersman and I took a stroll through this grass meadow in St. Ives, a small market town in Cambridgeshire where I work from a small office above a supermarket. Erik was on holiday, but that didn't stop us taking a long walk discussing life, family and work. Erik had a few ideas on the boil, and I was entering a new phase after stepping back from day-to-day operations at FrontlineSMS a couple of months earlier.

I walk a lot, and often use the time to think, strategise and develop my ideas. The walk with Erik that day wasn't particularly unusual, but something rather rare and unusual has happened since.

During our conversation, I told Erik I was thinking of publishing a book on social innovation – something I'd always wanted to do but lacked the seed of what I thought was a solid enough idea. That summer, a short article I'd penned – Genius Happens When You Plan Something Else – had appeared in the print edition of Wired magazine in the UK. The article looked at the concept of *reluctant innovation*, but was only 600 words long. I felt there was much more of a story to tell, and discussed the idea of turning the article into a full book. Erik was, of course, invited to contribute a chapter on his own life and work.

Once I'd decided to go for it, the next fifteen months were frantic. There were times the book looked like it wouldn't come off. The first Kickstarter campaign was a spectacular failure. The second was better thought out and successful. That campaign was topped up by the Curry Stone Foundation, and a little personal funding on top took the book past a key financial hurdle. Along the way I managed to find a publisher, secure a foreword from Archbishop Desmond Tutu and collect two dozen high profile endorsements. Everything finally fell into place and in November 2013 "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator" hit the shelves, hitting top spot in Amazon's 'Development Studies' chart a few months later. A number of colleges and universities in the

'A book of hope, inspiration, and a beacon of what's possible'
From the foreword by Archbishop Desmond Tutu

The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator
When problems find people, amazing things can happen

Edited by
Ken Banks

US and UK have also picked up on the book, using it as part of their social innovation courses.

Self-publishing is tough, and a massive learning curve, but it's been well worth it. "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator" always felt like a book that needed to exist. Thanks to that walk in the meadow, today it does.

If my book was to be difficult, Erik's idea was on another planet. Today you'll know the vague little black box we discussed as BRCK. The conversation was fascinating on a number of levels, and I loved the idea of a Kenyan outfit fixing an African problem that others either didn't know about, or didn't care about. But while we were both serial software developers, neither of us had built hardware before (although we had talked about designing and building a FrontlineSMS/Ushahidi GSM modem a couple of years earlier during one of our stints at PopTech). That summer I was about to throw myself into the murky world of publishing. Erik was on the verge of doing the same in the hardware industry. I didn't envy him.

(Photo: BRCK)

Two years on, and the BRCK is a reality thanks to a Kickstarter campaign that blew their total out of the water, followed up by a further $1.2 million in venture funding. (Erik was always determined to make this a business, not another non-profit venture. We've had many conversations about the need for a more solid business approach to the kinds of 'development' problems BRCK was built to solve). It's not been easy for the team, and I've been fortunate to see early prototypes and have numerous behind-the-scenes conversations on the challenges of not only building hardware, but doing it from East Africa.

That said, the BRCK team have been very open about the process and they've regularly blogged updates when things have been going well, and not so well. "Problems, Perseverance and Patience" gives great insight as it takes you through the whole BRCK story. No mention of the meadow there, though.

We constantly hear that ideas are cheap, and that it's all about execution. To an extent, that's true. What was unusual about that summer walk in the meadow – our field of dreams – wasn't so much two friends sharing ideas, but two friends with a dream they both saw through. In both our worlds, BRCK and "The Rise" both felt like things that needed to exist.

Thankfully, today, they do.

TRIBUTE TO A FRIEND

It's quite fitting, really, that I find myself sitting in the most unlikely place – the foyer of a five star hotel in Saudi Arabia – randomly reading a tribute to a man who was instrumental in helping get me where I am today.
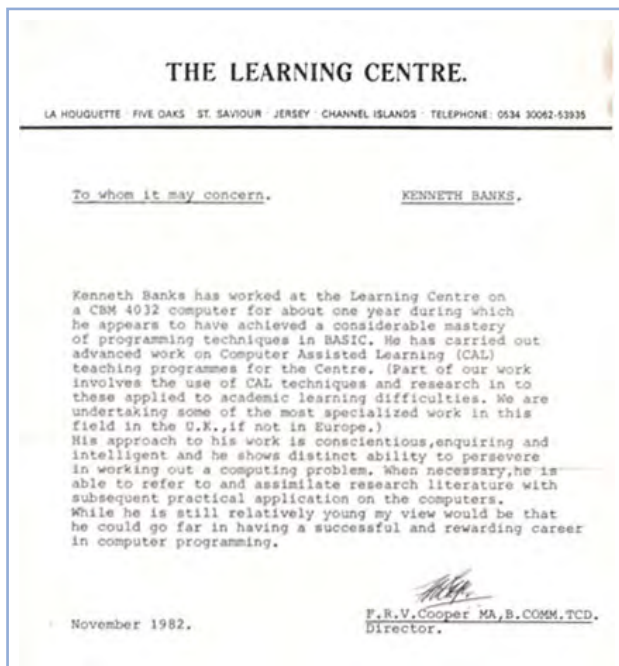
You won't find anything online about Frederick Richard Vivian Howard Cooper, not even news of his passing late last year. Freddie was an intensely private man. His phone number was ex-directory, and he never gave anyone his contact details. For the vast majority of the time I knew him it was his social club down the road from the housing estate where I grew up in Jersey that gave me the point of contact I needed. After the "Learning Centre" shut down in 2000, that point of contact was lost, and we only managed to reconnect on a couple of further occasions before his passing.

The last time we spoke I'd just got news of my fellowship at Stanford, and we shared a coffee in St. Helier and reminisced about his club, and the early computer-aided-learning (CAL) programs I'd written for him on the Commodore PET computer he used in his teaching.

I was about fourteen when he first let me loose on it, and it sparked the beginnings of my IT career. Freddie even wrote my first ever reference, in 1982, when I nearly dipped out of school early to pursue that career. Without his help I would never have learnt to code, and would never have gained the early experience which later helped me secure employment running mainframe computers for a number of banks in the Island. He gave me an amazing opportunity, and I took it.
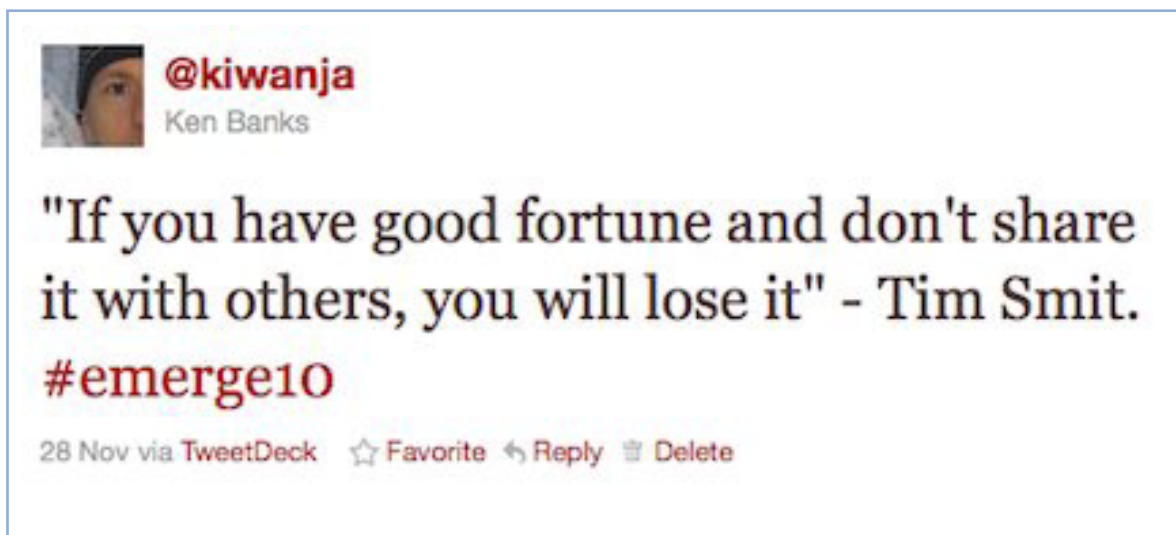
When I think about everything that's happened to me since, and think about where I am today, Freddie Cooper was the early catalyst. He was an outstanding individual who gave many children on my housing estate guidance, friendship and advice over many years. He helped me gain experience on computers at a time when it was barely being taught in schools, and at a time when very few people could have afforded one of their own. Had it not been for him I would not have been able to code the first prototype version of FrontlineSMS almost twenty-five years later. All of the users of that software today – and the people benefitting from that use – have Freddie to thank, too. It seemed only fitting to credit the significant role he played in my recent book, "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator".

THE LEARNING CENTRE.

LA HOUGUETTE · FIVE OAKS · ST. SAVIOUR · JERSEY · CHANNEL ISLANDS · TELEPHONE: 0534 30062-53935

To whom it may concern.   KENNETH BANKS.

Kenneth Banks has worked at the Learning Centre on a CBM 4032 computer for about one year during which he appears to have achieved a considerable mastery of programming techniques in BASIC. He has carried out advanced work on Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) teaching programmes for the Centre. (Part of our work involves the use of CAL techniques and research in to these applied to academic learning difficulties. We are undertaking some of the most specialized work in this field in the U.K.,if not in Europe.)
His approach to his work is conscientious,enquiring and intelligent and he shows distinct ability to persevere in working out a computing problem. When necessary,he is able to refer to and assimilate research literature with subsequent practical application on the computers.
While he is still relatively young my view would be that he could go far in having a successful and rewarding career in computer programming.

November 1982.   F.R.V.Cooper MA,B.COMM.TCD.
                                  Director.

One regret is that I didn't get that one final chance to meet him and talk about all the exciting things happening today, and to thank him – and joke – one last time. He'd have been particularly proud of the work we're doing with National Geographic. But taking credit was never Freddie's style. If he'd wanted it, and wanted to be constantly reminded of what he'd done for the many people he'd helped, then he wouldn't have kept himself to himself and wouldn't have made it so difficult to track him down.

My career has been blessed by having met many wonderful people who've given me opportunities I could never have dreamed of. I took them all. Freddie Cooper set the ball rolling – and set the tone – over thirty years ago. And it's because of this that I believe so strongly that we should help everyone along on their own journey whenever and wherever we can.

As Tim Smit reminded me not so long ago:

@kiwanja
Ken Banks

"If you have good fortune and don't share it with others, you will lose it" - Tim Smit.
#emerge10

28 Nov via TweetDeck   ☆ Favorite ↩ Reply 🗑 Delete

Thanks, Freddie. For everything. May you rest in peace.

INNOVATION OUT OF NECESSITY IS ALIVE AND WELL

While much of the West debates the pros, cons, merits and current state of technological innovation, innovators in the developing world just get on with it. And they've never been so busy. Innovation out of necessity is alive and well, and on the rise..

For many of us, innovation is the iPhone, iPad or pretty much anything that comes from today's high-tech production line. It's the latest phone, laptop, smart watch or passenger aircraft, and it's designed to make things easier, quicker, more convenient and, in some cases, just more fun. We rarely question why we feel we need the latest and greatest, why we change our phones every year, or even what the drivers might be for all these high-tech innovations. Who, for example, decided the world needed an iPad-powered coffee machine?

Much of the innovation we see in the developing world, whether the innovators behind them come from there or not, is done out of necessity. They solve very real problems, many of which happen to be faced on a daily basis by many of the poorest and most vulnerable people on the planet. Innovation here isn't about fast, shiny or modern, it's about solving very real problems. And many of those problems aren't going away any time soon.

Entrepreneurs in the West may well be losing the will to innovate, although I'd suggest it's more about ability and a conducive environment than will. Many face difficulties with funding, highly competitive markets and patent wars, all of which make for challenging times. But this is far from the case throughout much of Africa, where I've focused most of my efforts for the past 20 years. Many innovations here are born by the side of the road, or in rural villages without any funding at all. Furthermore, market opportunities abound and patents are the last things on people's minds. Compared to the West, African markets are still something of a Wild West in innovation terms, and this is precisely why there's so much focus there.

Innovation out of necessity has given Kenya, for example, a world-leading position in mobile payments. On a continent where hundreds of millions of people lacked bank accounts, mobile phones provided the answer. An estimated 40% of Kenya's GDP now works its way through Safaricom's M-PESA system. It's an innovation success story, and it's provided a platform for many other innovators to offer everything from pay-as-you-go solar lighting to villagers to automated payment platforms for microfinance organisations. The further (anticipated) opening up of systems like M-PESA will spur even more innovation in the future. This is just the beginning.

When faced with very real problems that in many cases cost lives, innovators in the developing world kick into a different gear. With little funding or resources, it's innovation in this 'long tail' that is most interesting – a place where people innovate out of necessity, not luxury, and as a matter of survival or ethics, not profit or markets. Health is a classic example of these drivers at work.

Six out of the 10 chapters in my recent book, "The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator", cover health. The issues these innovators address include data collection, genetic disorders, communications between community health workers, patents, access to medicines, and solar energy as a lighting solution for maternity wards. The range of examples shows how broad and complex an issue health is, as well as the sheer scale of the need for its improvement across much of the developing world.

Many others are better placed to comment on whether entrepreneurs in the West are losing the will to innovate. Whatever the outcome of that debate, thankfully this isn't the case in the places that matter – the places where far too many people still die from perfectly treatable diseases, or fail to reach their potential because of a lack of access to the most basic of education.

To paraphrase former Liverpool football manager, Bill Shankly, in the developing world innovation isn't just a matter of life or death. It's more important than that.

TIME TO THINK MESSAGE AND MOTIVATION

Few companies succeed if they don't take the time to understand their users. Fewer non-profit ventures succeed if they don't either. After recently 'moving on' from FrontlineSMS and a ten year spell focusing exclusively on ICT4D, I'm beginning to realise that much of the wider technology-based social sector suffers from not-too-dissimilar problems. Few people, it seems, working on software-based solutions have much of an appreciation of the motives to engage, and the technical literacy, of their target audience. Whenever that's the case, things tend not to turn out too well.

For the past few years I've been taking an increasing interest in economic resilience, particularly how technology could be applied to buffer local communities from global economic downturns. Ironically, since I started that research the world *has* entered a period of growing economic uncertainty. The causes – although fascinating – don't so much interest me, more the response at local, grassroots level and the response from the social sector, particularly those turning to technology to provide some of the answers.

My Means of Exchange project particularly motivates me because it's tasked with understanding what drives some local people (and not others) to resort to alternative methods of exchange, particularly during times of hardship, and explores how we might motivate the wider global community to adopt a healthier mix of exchange as a part of its daily lives – before things get bad. Money has become the dominate means of exchange in almost all of our lives, to the detriment of all the more creative, flexible methods that came before it.

In parallel with all of this is a growing interest in the sharing economy, and local and digital currencies which – if adopted widely enough – might just loosen the stranglehold of legal tender. And therein lies the problem. No matter how good the technology, solution or service, in almost all cases if it's not adopted widely enough it's unlikely to succeed. And one of the biggest problems many alternative exchange tools have is that they're just not marketed or promoted well enough to reach anywhere near the tipping point they need. I talked

a lot about the difficulties the local sustainability and alternative economy movements have in effectively communicating its message, and engaging their audience, in a recent ten minute talk at Pop!Tech.

Sadly, it's an area that continues to be overlooked.

A couple of weeks ago, at the Bitcoin London Conference, BBC reporter Rory-Cellan Jones neatly highlighted the ongoing challenge:

ASKED HOW THE ATTRACTIONS OF THE BITCOIN CURRENCY WOULD BE COMMUNICATED TO THE PUBLIC, ONE SPEAKER SAID EVERYONE WOULD NEED TO LEARN COMPUTER SCIENCE.
-RORY CELLAN-JONES (BBC)

In case you've not been following the discussion, Bitcoins are an independently machine-generated digital currency (i.e. not owned or managed by any country or entity) which some people believe will revolutionise global trade. Right now, the majority of people active in the Bitcoin world are programmers, developers and geeks, which is where many of these kinds of things start. The problem right now is the language of the movement is far too technical, and this is a problem. Even going to Wikipedia to get an explanation of Bitcoins would leave most of the general public scratching their heads:

Bitcoin (code: BTC) is a cryptocurrency where the creation and transfer of bitcoins is based on an open source cryptographic protocol that is independent of any central authority. Bitcoins can be transferred through a computer or smartphone without an intermediate financial institution.The concept was introduced in a 2008 paper by pseudonymous developer Satoshi Nakamoto, who called it a peer-to-peer, electronic cash system

There is already widespread misunderstanding of how new money is created, and clearly with Bitcoins – however good-an-alternative they may be – we're not much better off. If shop keepers and the general public are to embrace such an idea and, let's face it, they'll have to for it to succeed, clearly some serious PR work needs to be done. (For a simple run-down of what the fuss is all about with Bitcoins, Bloomberg have a helpful feature here).

There is definitely a need for alternative means of exchange (note: plural), as I mentioned in an interview with Quartz recently. My belief is that a growing number of people worldwide have grown tired of being burned by globalisation and just want to get back to functioning within sustainable local systems. They need alternatives to cash, but just don't realise it yet.

Because of the way our globalised world works (great when it does, rubbish when it doesn't), hard-working people, and communities, are being destroyed by financial meltdown in distant places. Globalisation has eroded our incentives, and ability, to play well together as local communities, meaning we're now less resilient to shocks of all kinds than we used to be

Everyone engaged in the alternative economy and local sustainability movement have already passed the 'recognition threshold' – recognition that the current system is broken to the detriment of people and planet everywhere, and that we need alternatives. But these people – me included – are in the minority. We might see how broken the system is, but we should never assume that it's so obvious that everyone else ought to, too.

While we build the tools and, yes – the Bitcoins of the future – we need to seriously work on how we communicate. Conference gatherings have already become echo chambers for much of the ICT4D community. Whatever it is that makes people nod enthusiastically within the walls of alternative economy and sustainability events needs to first be simplified, and then communicated outside in an exciting, engaging way.

As my work over the years has taught me, technology is almost always the easy part. Behaviour change – that's a totally different beast altogether.

# 2013: THE END OF SUSTAINABILITY?

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One of the most interesting comments I've read for while came in this article by Andrew Zolli for the New York Times, written in the aftermath of Hurricane Sandy late last year:

Today, precisely because the world is so increasingly out of balance, the sustainability regime is being quietly challenged, not from without, but from within. Among a growing number of scientists, social innovators, community leaders, nongovernmental organisations, philanthropies, governments and corporations, a new dialogue is emerging around a new idea, resilience: How to help vulnerable people, organisations and systems persist, perhaps even thrive, amid unforeseeable disruptions. Where sustainability aims to put the world back into balance, resilience looks for ways to manage in an imbalanced world.

Having spent a large part of my career working in and around environmentalism and conservation (see an earlier post on lessons learnt in primate conservation), a reality-check of 'sustainability' is something I've had on my mind for a while. With its arch enemy – population growth – driving ever-upward, I've often wondered whether we're just stalling for time or delaying the inevitable. The problem with this school of thought, of course, is that it's considered by many to be defeatist, particularly by those in the actual business of conservation and environmental protection.

Technology allows us to stretch the limits of what's possible – grow significantly more food per acre, or live in climates we were never meant to live in – all activities which make us feel comfortable about the world and the places we live within it. Much of this technology has become invisible. We no longer think about the innovations that allow us to grow more, or healthier, food. Or those that get electricity to our homes, or the satellites that help get cars and planes from A to B. It's only when we don't have access to these things that we suddenly realise how exposed and dependent we are on them. Surviving technological meltdown is the subject of a wide number of books, including the aptly-titled "When Technology Fails" by Matthew Stein.
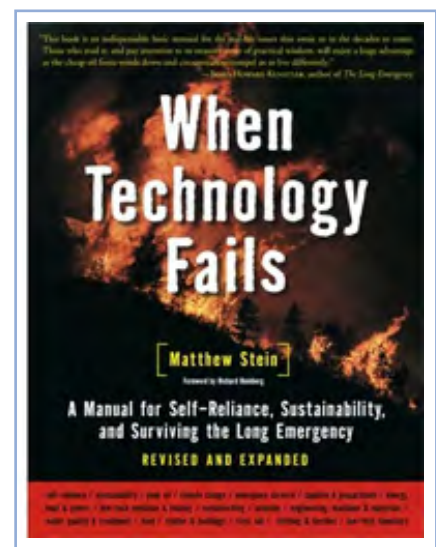
The environmental movement (which is to all intents and purposes linked to sustainability) is around forty years old. Its birth is widely linked to the publication

of Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring", her seminal book which argued against the increasing use of pesticides in farming. Unsurprisingly, it wasn't hugely popular within the ranks of the chemical industry, but it did spur the birth of grassroots environmentalism which in turn lead to the creation of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). If pesticide use continued, Carson argued, Springs of the future would be void of bird life, amongst others (hence the title).

In another of my favourite books, "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed", Jared Diamond graphically illustrates what happens to communities and civilisations which live beyond their means. We can learn a lot from history, but today not enough of us are listening. Our world population of over seven billion is already two to three times higher than what's sustainable and, according to the World Population Balance website, recent studies have shown that the Earth's resources are enough to sustain only about two billion people at most European's current standard of living. In short, we're in trouble.

During a recent talk at Pop!Tech I highlighted two things that I thought needed to change. First, we need to get people to listen and take interest, but not in the way the wider non-profit movement has historically tried to get us to (i.e. guilt-based education). Second, we need to rethink our relationships with local business, local resources, and each other. You can watch that ten minute talk below, and find out more of what we'll be up to on the soon-to-launch Means of Exchange website.
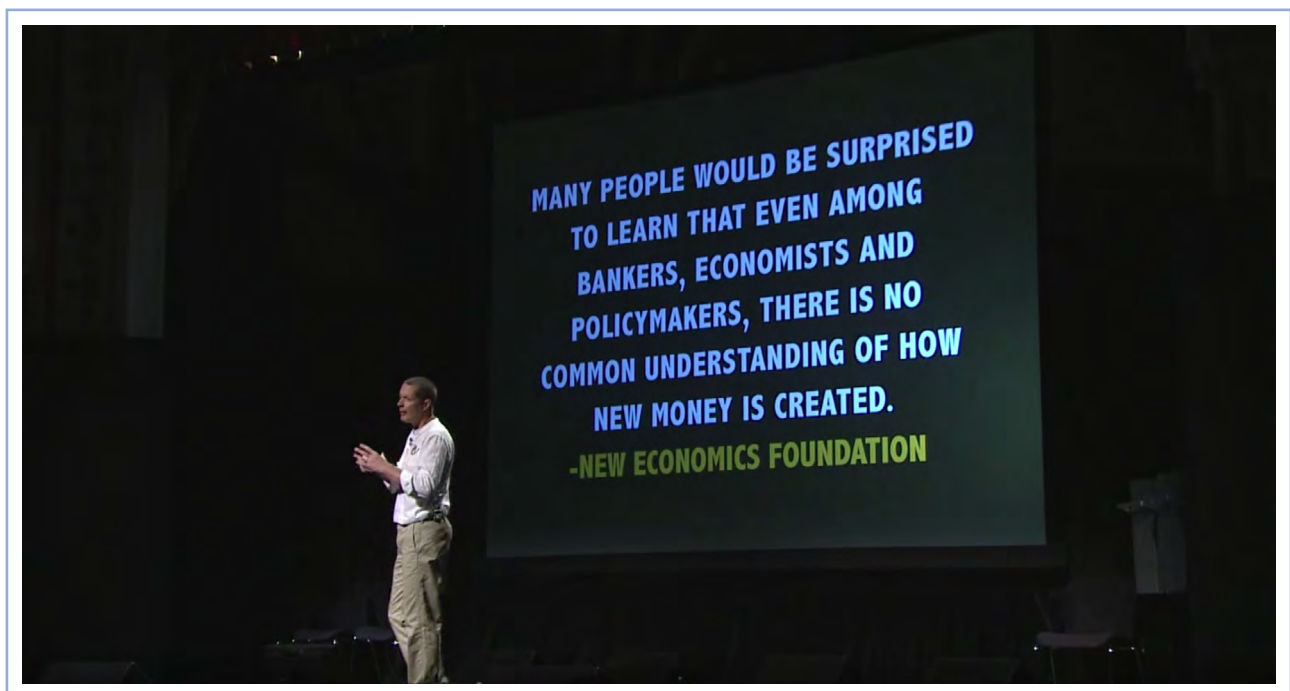
As I admit at the start of my talk, I have more questions than answers right now. But I do know that, with the current economic climate, conditions are better than they've ever been to get people to rethink their relationship with money, resources and each other. These may not directly impact the environmental or sustainability agenda, but the secondary benefit of people making better use of the human, social, financial and environmental capital around them almost certainly will.

REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER IN IT

Exactly ten years ago next month I started work in the fledgling mobiles-for-development sector. I was incredibly lucky to get in so early, in large part due to the incredible foresight of the corporate team at Fauna & Flora International who realised the potential of mobile in the conservation and development fields very early, and invited me on board to help figure out the technology challenges.

I'd never worked with mobile phones before, but to be fair in December 2002 very few other people had either. What did stand me in good stead was my earlier IT experience. Looking back now it all looks incredibly archaic, demonstrating – more than anything – the speed and rate of innovation in just half my lifetime.

This is the computer I learnt to program on. The Commodore PET had a whopping 32K of RAM, no hard drive (just a cassette deck to save programs to tape), and a massive 40 character screen width. Learning how to hack this as a teenager eventually launched a career in IT (with a bunch of travel and a university education in between).

In the mid-1980's, as my professional IT career began, I took charge of this beauty at Hambros Bank in Jersey. This Burroughs B1900 mainframe had 2Mb of RAM and ran all of the bank's systems. It had six exchangeable drives and a command console to drive everything. These were the fun days of computing when everything was big, everything seemed to breathe, and machines had soul.

I doubt I'll look back at my iPhone or MacBook Air with the same feeling of nostalgia and romance. But let's save that for another post, perhaps when I celebrate my twentieth anniversary in mobile…

TECHNOLOGY AND THE DEMOCRATISATION OF DEVELOPMENT

🔗

I was recently invited to contribute an article to **BBC Future**'s A Matter of Life and Tech, a series which features a "range of voices from people helping to build Africa's tech future". In the article, I argue that technology has become a vital tool in the fight against poverty, allowing people to participate in development in ways never previously possible. The original article is not available in the UK due to licensing restrictions.

Twenty years ago, if you were information technology-literate and interested in international development, your options were limited.

That's how things were for me when, in 1993, armed with ten years programming and networking experience I began turning my attention to the developing world.

My efforts didn't get me far. The information technology revolution we see today had barely started at home, let alone in many of the developing nations. If you weren't an English teacher, a doctor, a policy maker, an economist or a dam builder, careers in development seemed somewhat limited.

How things have changed. Driven largely by the spread of the world wide web and the burgeoning mobile phone sector, opportunities to develop solutions to many of the world's social and environmental problems have reached almost every bedroom and garden shed in the land.

The irony today is that arguably the greatest developmental tool we have in our hands isn't a product of the tens of billons of developmental aid spent over the years, but a by-product of private sector investment. Putting the debate around costs and coverage to one side, the development sector has a lot to thank the mobile industry for.

In 1993 the number of mobile subscribers in Africa numbered in the hundreds of thousands. By 1998 that had crept to four million. Today there are an estimated 735 million with penetration running at around the 70% mark. Not bad in less than 20 years.

Everyday innovation

The result of this growth is that many Africans now experience their first phone call on a mobile, and their first experience of the world wide web comes on the

same small screen. And it's been that way for a while. Mobile phones are to most Africans what our laptops, tablet computers and landlines are to us, combined.

They're also their banks. Today, as they pay bills and transfer money to friends and family with the press of a few key strokes, tens of millions of Africans will be doing something most of us in the west can only dream of.

But this rise in mobile phone ownership, and the slower but still significant rise in access to the internet, doesn't just represent a significant business opportunity. A few short years ago, non-profit organisations working on the ground suddenly found themselves with a new tool in their fight against poverty.

Mobile phone ownership among the communities many of them serve presents new opportunities to increase the reach and efficiency of their work. Simply being able to send messages to coordinate meetings, or to remind people of key messages, can save hours – even days – on the road.

Community healthcare workers can also stay in better touch with the hospital when they're back in their villages. Farmers can access advice and market information directly from their fields. Citizens can report corruption, or engage in debate. Births can be registered. Illegal logging can be recorded and reported. It's safe to say that mobile phones have touched every sector of development in one way or another. It has become so ubiquitous that, in just a few short years, many development workers can hardly imagine life without them.

The beauty of mobile technology is that, unlike larger development efforts, it doesn't discriminate against the smaller, grassroots organisations. As we've found with the countless number of FrontlineSMS users over the years, if you give people the right tools and conditions to work in they're capable of innovating as well as anyone. Some of the most exciting technology-based development work going in Africa today is African. Barriers to entry are as low as they've ever been.

This "democratisation of development" isn't just taking place in cities, towns and villages across Africa. With the internet as the distribution mechanism, and the mobile phone as the target device, anyone anywhere can today build a tool and make it available to a global audience with the minimum of funding and the minimum of effort. This is exactly how FrontlineSMS came about almost seven years ago.

'Extreme affordability'

How to go about developing the right tools is, of course, an ongoing debate but at least the phones are in the hands of the end users, and by-and-large the delivery mechanism is in place. The next stage of the communications revolution will come in the shape of smart phones, presenting yet more

opportunity. What we see happening today is exciting, but we haven't seen anything yet.

Prestigious universities and colleges around the world now devote entire courses to technology-for-development, many wrapped up with subjects such as design and entrepreneurship. Stanford University helps "design for extreme affordability", while MIT initiatives aim to "educate students in science and technology that will best serve the world in the 21st century".

There are likely more people working on solving social and environmental problems in the world today than ever before in human history.

Since starting out working with mobiles almost ten years ago, I've seen at first hand this shift in focus. Designing mobile applications for the next billion, or the bottom of the pyramid, or the other 90% – whatever you choose to call it – is now big business. You only have to look at cites like Nairobi, where companies like Google, IBM, Microsoft, Nokia, Hewlett Packard and Samsung have set up shop.

Their mission, in many cases, is to help to get the best African minds thinking about African problems. Clearly, if this trend continues then Africans are less likely to be left behind in designing solutions for their own continent than they were before. It would be hard for anyone to argue that this is not a positive step.

At the same time as this influx of big business, there are increasing numbers of homegrown initiatives. Innovation and technology labs have been springing up over the continent for at least the last three years. According to Erik Hersman, Founder of the iHub, there are now more than 50 tech hubs, labs, incubators and accelerators in Africa, covering more than 20 countries. Mobile phones will be at the centre of the majority of solutions their tenants develop.

I've always maintained that one of the best things about the use of mobile phones as a development tool is that it was never planned. The development sector has shown that, historically, it's not been overly successful at delivering on those.

Instead, anyone anywhere with an internet connection and a software development kit can help tackle some of the bigger problems of our time. What we are witnessing is the democratisation of development.

Today, you don't need to be a doctor, teacher, economist or dam builder to make a positive impact on your – or any other – country's development. And that can only be a good thing.

# INDIGENOUS AND INGENIOUS: THE ROOTS OF MOBILE BANKING IN AFRICA 🔗

In Ghana, it's popularly known as susu. In Cameroon, tontines or chilembe. And in South Africa, stokfel. Today, you'd most likely call it plain-old microfinance, the nearest term we have for it. Age-old indigenous credit schemes have run perfectly well without much outside intervention for generations. Although, in our excitement to implement new technologies and solutions, we sometimes fail to recognise them. Innovations such as mobile banking – great as they may be – are hailed as revolutionary without much consideration for what may have come before, or who the original innovators may have been.

The image of traditional African societies as predominantly "simple hunter-gatherer" is more myth than truth. The belief that Africa had little by way of economic institutions and processes before the arrival of the Europeans is another. As Niti Bhan pointed out during a fascinating "Life is Hard" presentation at the Better World By Design Conference a couple of years ago, many rural communities today are familiar with concepts such as loans, barter, swap, trade, credit and interest rates, yet the majority remain excluded from the mainstream modern banking system and have never heard of things like ATMs, banks, mortgages or credit cards. It's not that people don't understand banking concepts – it's just that, for them, things go by a different name.

In Kenya, as few as one in 10 people may have a bank account, but that doesn't stop many of them from using a number of trading instruments or running successful businesses. Technology can certainly help strengthen traditional trading practices, and we know this because when technology is made available, the users are often the first to figure out how to best make it work for them. Mobile technology is today showcasing African grassroots innovation at its finest.

Africans are not the passive recipients of technology many people seem to think they are. Indeed, some of the more exciting and innovative mobile services around today have emerged as a result of ingenious indigenous use of the technology. Services such as "Call Me" – where customers on many African networks can send a fixed number of free messages per day when they're out of credit
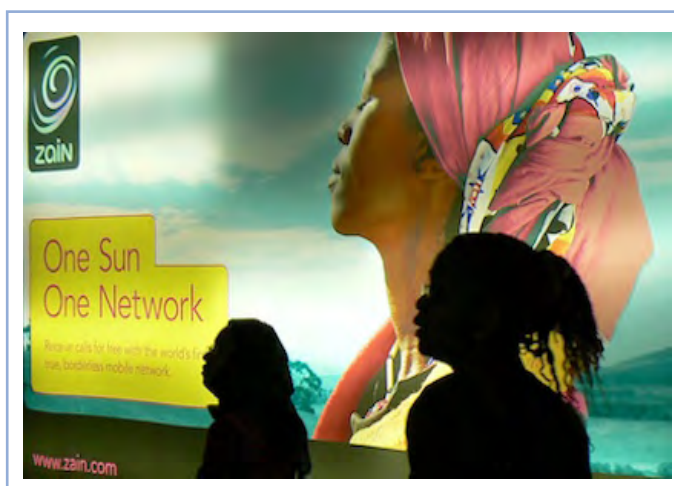
requesting someone to call them – came about as a result of people "flashing" or "beeping" their friends (in other words, calling their phones and hanging up to indicate that they wanted to talk). A lot of interesting research on this phenomenon has been carried out by Jonathan Donner, an anthropologist working at Microsoft Research. Today's more formal and official "Call Me"-style services have come about as a direct result of this entrepreneurial behavior.

The concept of mobile payments did, too.

Researchers have for some time been observing the behavior of users in developing countries, seeking to identify the next big thing. As Jo Best recently put it, many of these ideas spring from "the fertile mind of some user who wanted to do something with a mobile that their operator hadn't provided yet."

Tapping into these fertile minds is a fascinating business, something that Jan Chipchase (formerly of Nokia, now with Frog Design) is famous for. Some of Jan's earlier observations identified emerging mobile payment-style services long before the mobile operators, or even the ICT4D community, had even thought of them. The mantra "build it and they will come" seems alive and well in the African mobile context.

Whilst many traditional development approaches generally introduce alien ideologies and concepts into developing countries – sometimes for the better, often for the worst – today's emerging mobile services are very much based on a model of indigenous innovation. Take M-Pesa, the much-touted Kenyan mobile money transfer service developed by Vodafone and the U.K. Department for International Development, as an example. Increasing numbers of African users were already carrying out their own form of money transfers through their mobiles long before any official service came into being. SENTE, from Uganda, is one of the better known indigenous systems (M-Sente is now the name of Uganda Telecom's official mobile money service).

What M-Pesa has done is formalise and scale this kind of activity and bring it fully to market. Its impact has been spectacular, with around 17 million subscribers now using the service, and 50% of Kenya's entire GDP expected to pass through the platform over the next twelve months. But what services
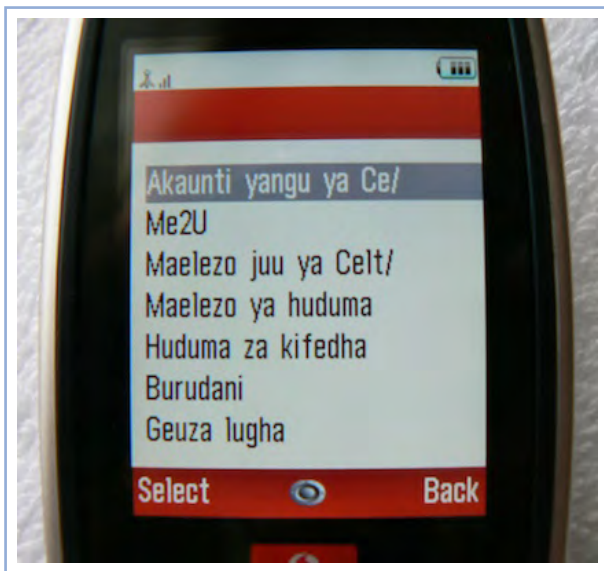
such as these, rolling out in increasing numbers of African countries, have done to earlier "indigenous" systems – mobile-based, such as SENTE, or more traditional microfinance solutions, such as susu, tontines or chilembe – is not so clear, although the latter were most likely well on the decline long before mobile phones came on the scene.

Many indigenous economic systems still exist today where they haven't been wholly replaced by modern financial structures or technologies. In "Africa Unchained," George Ayittey states his belief that future African economic prosperity lies in traditional systems and practices:

> "Women traders can still be found at most markets in Africa. They still trade their wares for profit. And in virtually all traditional markets today, bargaining over prices is still the norm – an ancient tradition. Traditional African chiefs do not fix prices. And it is this indigenous economic system, characterised by free village markets, free trade and free enterprise that Africa must turn to for its economic rejuvenation."

It's likely that many people would argue strongly against Ayittey on this, believing that progress across the African continent is based on embracing change and the new world economic and technological order. It's an active and fascinating debate. Whichever side of the fence you're on, all of this does raise one important question.

Should technology solutions aimed at the developing world, and mobile solutions in particular, seek to build on and enhance indigenous, traditional activities – economic or otherwise – or, where necessary, is it okay just to replace and lose them?

That isn't the only question, either. How does the introduction of emerging mobile services shift the balance of power in traditional African societies? Will women, for example, remain as economically active participants in the new mobile-powered world, or will men take more control? Do mobiles narrow or widen gender inequalities? Is technology exacerbating the gap between the haves and have-nots, or is it truly proving as transformational as we all believe or hope?

Very few businesses would willingly throw out all of their processes and procedures in order to implement a new IT system, however good it may be. The more astute ICT solutions providers know this and, wherever possible,

aim to allow seamless integration of any new technology into their clients' workplaces and working practices. Doesn't it make sense that we should take the same approach with indigenous societies and seek to build on existing procedures and traditions, and not just assume that a new, modern solution is better and replace everything that went before?

It's a fine balancing act and one people are still trying to figure out. The irony could be that while growing numbers of social scientists are turning to technology to help preserve and document disappearing cultures, the same technologies may be contributing to their ultimate decline.

IN SEARCH OF AN ICT4D MANTRA

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In many sectors of international development it's hard to imagine how you'd have much impact if you weren't out in the field. After all, teachers want to be in-class. Doctors want to be in-clinic. And conservationists want to be in-situ. There's only so much any of them can do when they're not. Getting 'stuck in' is largely what it's all about.

So why are so many ICT4D professionals happy to work remotely? And why does much of the ICT4D sector not find that odd?

In an article due to be published this week on BBC Future, I write about how technology has 'democratised development' and that there are "likely more people working on solving social and environmental problems in the world today than ever before in human history". The spread of mobile technology and the Internet has made all of this possible. These are exciting times, make no mistake.

But just because these tech-based opportunities have literally come to us in the comfort of our own homes, we mustn't kid ourselves into believing that we don't need to make any effort to lay the groundwork to our apps and ideas by getting out and spending time in the field. Just because the very technologies we use, by their very nature, allow us to work at-a-distance – remotely – that doesn't mean we have to. If that doctor, or teacher, or conservationist could do their work without stepping into that Malawian clinic, or Lusaka classroom or Namibian national park, would they? I doubt it.

Ken Banks
@kiwanja

"Go to the people. Live with them, learn from them. Start with what they know, build with what they have" - Lao Tzu (via @phat_controller)

Last night I caught sight of a tweet from Tony Roberts. Although it sounds like something an anthropologist (or philosopher) might say, it perfectly describes an approach the ICT4D sector might like to adopt.

The beauty of the Internet, and the spread of mobile technology, is that anyone anywhere can quickly develop and distribute a mobile-based solution to a social or environmental problem, and start picking up users immediately. The technology is in place, and the distribution channel is there. All that's needed are good, solid ideas and a drive and passion to fix a problem somewhere – and, let's face it, there are plenty of those. All-in-all, the barriers to entry are lower than they've ever been.

But they're so low we end up with a different problem.

For the doctor, teacher or conservationist, understanding the context of their patient, student or endangered species is critical for the work they do if they're to do it well. With few exceptions, they can only get that by spending time in the field. This isn't perceived to be the case for a programmer or coder. The result? A majority of apps written in isolation which have little chance of success.

Maybe that doesn't matter. With the barriers to entry so low the cost of building and distributing these apps is minimal. The fact that so many people are taking an interest in fixing things should be encouraging enough. But there's no doubt that spending time with your users, understanding their context, discussing what they need and then building a tool based on all of those things gives you the greatest chance of success.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: SEVENTEEN THINGS YOU MIGHT NOT KNOW ABOUT FRONTLINESMS

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This post was first published on the FrontlineSMS website last October to celebrate six years since the software's launch. This week the FrontlineSMS team – which now spans three continents – are preparing for the release of the latest version. Launch events are being held in the US, UK and Kenya.

With this, and our transition announcement a couple of weeks ago, it felt like a good time to reflect on the early days of the software. Thanks to the great support of our online community, users, staff, donors, bloggers and the media, FrontlineSMS today is well known throughout the wider ICT4D world. But it wasn't always that way. Here's that post in full.

In late October 2005, an early beta – "proof-of-concept" – version of FrontlineSMS was released to the world. It took just ten months for the idea to shape itself into the early stages of what you see today. In this, the second and last of our sixth birthday celebration posts (you can read the first here), we dig deep into our email archives and reveal some of the more interesting early – and perhaps surprising – moments of the project.

The idea for FrontlineSMS was conceived in early 2005 with the help of several field trips to South Africa and Mozambique, a bottle of beer and "Match of the Day". All is revealed in this fun, short National Geographic video made in 2010:

The very first email which specifically references FrontlineSMS was sent on **6th March, 2005 at 0853** to register the domain name.

Prior to that the working title was "Project SMS". The first email to reference "Project SMS" was sent on Wednesday 26th January, 2005 at 12:02. In it, the entire concept was described in just 963 words with an initial estimated budget of just £2,000 ($3,000).

Factoring in equipment and other costs, personal gifts totaling £10,000 were secured on 16th March, 2005 from two former Vodafone directors.

"The potential for FrontlineSMS is very exciting, and I am very much looking forward to working on the project. The potential impact for conservation and development is considerable." – Email from me to one of the supporters, 3rd May, 2005.

Preparation for the project officially got underway with the purchase of equipment totaling £1,476.09 on 22nd May, 2005:

```
Test/project laptop (Compaq V2000)        £655.31

Extended 3 year on-site warranty          £254.47

Symantec Partition Manager software       £29.78

Norton Antivirus 2005 upgrade    £14.89

Wireless portable mouse          £17.01

Microsoft Windows XP Pro upgrade       £144.67

Pack of blank DVDs        £6.80

VB.NET Developer guides and reference materials   £40.58

VB.NET Standard 2003 software    £66.37

Serial data cable for Nokia test phone   £4.26

Serial/USB adapter        £12.77

Ethernet adaptor and cable        £9.34

Sub-total         £1,256.25

VAT charged at point of sale @ 17.5%     £219.84

Total due         £1,476.09
```

One month later the timeline for the project was laid out. FrontlineSMS was delivered bang on schedule. From an email on 22nd June, 2005:

"I will begin working on the specification over the next couple of weeks, and will then get stuck into the initial programming phase during August. I have allocated that whole month to FrontlineSMS. As per the original timeline, July will be preparation, and August to September development time, so by October we should have something to trial."

August 2005: The Beta version of FrontlineSMS was developed on this kitchen table in Finland. In the absence of any other images, the forest view from the window was used as the main banner for the first FrontlineSMS website later that month.

News of FrontlineSMS was first revealed to the media in an interview with the Charity Times in August, 2005. Software development was briefly paused on 26th August so that the first FrontlineSMS website could be hastily put together ahead of the article's release.

"I have very high hopes that FrontlineSMS is really going to open the door to SMS technology to the wider NGO community" – Email to World Wildlife Fund, who were interested in trailing the software. 2nd September, 2005.

On 29th September, 2005 FrontlineSMS was presented for the first time at an internal event at Fauna & Flora International in Cambridge, UK:

On 5th October, 2005, to celebrate its imminent launch, FrontlineSMS buys up 200 pixels on the Million Dollar Homepage, a site which has since gone down in Internet folklore.

Ken Banks will give a download on his new project:

FrontlineSMS:
A text messaging application for
conservation and development

Thursday September 29th
12.30 - 1pm in the Library

Here's your chance to see a demonstration of a soon-to-be-released text messaging
system, one which could have useful applications for FFI projects which need to quickly and effectively
communicate with community groups, staff or field workers.

For some pre-show information, visit
http://www.frontlinesms.com/

Email, 6th October, 2005: *"Google now gives us around 80 results when searching for FrontlineSMS".* Today the number is well over 100,000.

Email to supporters, 31st October, 2005: *"The FrontlineSMS texting system is now ready for trial".* These nine words signaled our official launch exactly **six years ago today**.

Email dated 14th November, 2005 from the MacArthur Foundation: *"The MacArthur Foundation's Technology Grants Committee is always looking for innovative applications of technology for the NGO sector. I'd love to have a chat with you about your application if you have the time".* Two years later MacArthur would become the first donor to make an investment in FrontlineSMS with a $200,000 grant. This funded a major rewrite and a new website in 2008.

14th November, 2005: 160 Characters are the first mobile-focused news site to announce the release of FrontlineSMS.

15th November, 2005: We receive an email enquiry from Kubatana, a Zimbabwean civil society organisation. Days later FrontlineSMS had its first official implementation. Kubatana still use FrontlineSMS today.

Today, with fifteen staff over three continents, users in over 80 countries across 20 different non-profit sectors, and over 25,000 downloads, the rest – as they say – is history… \o/

WITH INNOVATION, LESS CAN BE MORE

🔗

If your technology solution turns out to be more complicated than the actual problem you're trying to solve then you've probably fallen into the "over-engineering" trap. The temptation to try to be all things to all people, or to cram in as much functionality as possible, can be the death of many technology-based projects.

In the world of innovation, interesting things happen if you train yourself to "think lean". In the examples below, less is not only more – it's the secret to success. **Google** looked at rivals and stripped back their home page, leaving the one vital component – the search box. **Blogger**, originally a component of a much larger information management platform called Pyra, was spun out after it proved the most useful feature. And *Twitter* took one small part of **Facebook** – the status update – and revolutionised how many of us communicate online.

Search engines

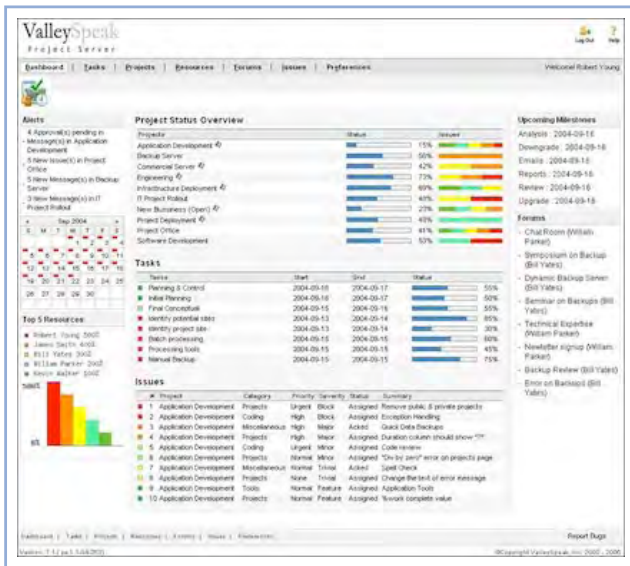From: Yahoo!'s "all things to all people"

To: Google's simple search

Management/publishing

From: Pyra's holistic project management platform

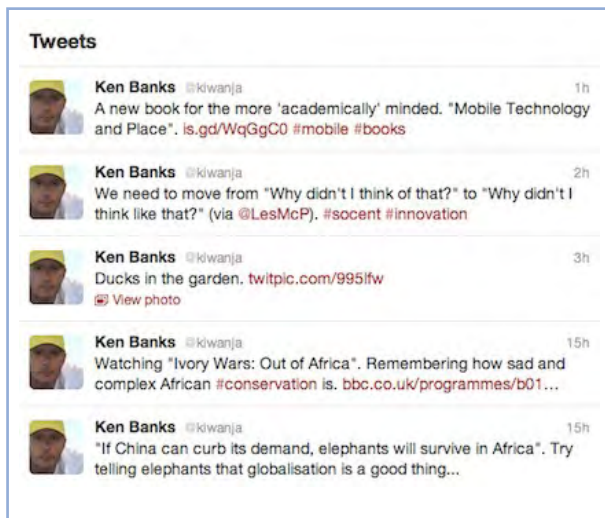To: Blogger's simple publishing tool

Social media

From: Facebook's rich timeline

To: Twitter's simple status update

Tweets

Ken Banks @kiwanja 1h
A new book for the more 'academically' minded. "Mobile Technology and Place". is.gd/WqGgC0 #mobile #books

Ken Banks @kiwanja 2h
We need to move from "Why didn't I think of that?" to "Why didn't I think like that?" (via @LesMcP). #socent #innovation

Ken Banks @kiwanja 3h
Ducks in the garden. twitpic.com/995lfw
View photo

Ken Banks @kiwanja 15h
Watching "Ivory Wars: Out of Africa". Remembering how sad and complex African #conservation is. bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01…

Ken Banks @kiwanja 15h
"If China can curb its demand, elephants will survive in Africa". Try telling elephants that globalisation is a good thing…

The lesson? Strip back your idea, get to the essence of what it is you're trying to do, and drop the clutter. Focus is king.

COMETH THE HOUR. COMETH THE TECHNOLOGY 🔗

For NGOs and developers alike, the ICT4D space can be a tough nut to crack. While NGOs generally struggle to find the tools they need to meet their particular needs, developers face the opposite problem – getting their tools into the hands of those who need them the most. Attempts to connect the NGO and developer communities – physically and virtually – continue to this day with varying degrees of success. There is no magic bullet.

Of course, bringing together the two parties in one place – community website, conference room or chat room – is only a small part of it. Getting them to understand each others needs, often over a technologically-fuelled chasm, can be another. While one side may approach things from a "technology looking for a problem" angle, NGOs often have it completely the other way round.

One of the earlier attempts to join the non-profit/developer dots took place in February 2007 in the boldly titled UN Meets Silicon Valley conference, where the United Nations met up with a bunch of Silicon Valley companies to explore how technology and industry could bolster international development. Lower-profile events also began to emerge around that time, often in the form of 'user generated conferences' such as BarCampAfrica (held in 2008) which aimed to:

> … bring people, institutions and enterprises interested in Africa together in one location to exchange ideas, build connections, re-frame perceptions and catalyse action that leads to positive involvement and mutual benefit between Silicon Valley and the continent of Africa

Having worked for many years in the non-profit sector, particularly in developing countries, I've seen at first-hand the kind of challenges many face, and their frustration at the lack of appropriate ICT solutions available to them. I've also been on the developer side of the fence, spending much of the last six years developing and promoting the use of FrontlineSMS. Unfortunately, despite what you might think, seeing the challenge from both perspectives doesn't necessarily make finding a solution any easier. Getting FrontlineSMS, for example, into the hands of NGOs has become slightly easier over time as more people get to hear about it, but it's been largely a reactionary process at a time I'd much rather have been proactive. No magic bullet for me.

Sadly, for every ICT solution that gains traction, many more don't even see the light of day. While you may argue those that failed probably weren't good enough, this isn't always the case. Take Kiva as a case in point. In the early days Matt and Jessica Flannery were regularly told by 'experts' that their idea wouldn't

work, that it wouldn't scale. They didn't give up, and today Kiva is a huge success story, connecting lenders – you and me – to small businesses in developing countries the world over. Since forming in late 2005 they have facilitated the lending of over $200 million to hundreds of thousands of entrepreneurs in some of the poorest countries in the world.

A key turning point for Kiva was their decision to switch from business plans to 'action' plans, getting out there and building their success from the ground up. Some of us would call this "rapid prototyping", or "failing fast". Whatever you choose to call it, it's an approach I firmly believe in. In places like Silicon Valley getting it wrong isn't seen as a bad thing, and this encourages a "rapid prototyping" culture. Sadly the story is very different in the UK.

Some projects – Kiva and FrontlineSMS among them – are based on experiences gained in the field and the belief that a particular problem can be solved with an appropriate technological intervention. Of course, before any ICT4D solution can succeed there has to be a need. It doesn't matter how good a solution is if people don't see the 'problem' as one that needs fixing. In the case of Kiva, borrowers were clearly in need of funds, yet lenders lacked access to them. With FrontlineSMS, grassroots non-profits were keen to make use of the growing numbers of mobile phones among their stakeholders, but lacked a platform to communicate with them. These two initiatives worked because they were problems that not only found a solution, but a solution that was appropriate and one that was easy to deploy.

The ICT4D space is exciting and challenging in equal measure, and by its very nature practitioners tend to focus on some of the most pressing problems in the most challenging parts of the world. Whether it's a natural disaster, a stolen election, human-wildlife conflict, a crushed uprising or a health epidemic, elements of the ICT4D community spring into action to either help co-ordinate, fix, or report on events. Interestingly, it can sometimes be the events themselves which raise the profile of a particular ICT solution, or the events themselves which lead to the creation of new tools and resources.

In 2006, Erik Sundelof was one of a dozen Reuters Digital Vision Fellows at Stanford University, a programme I was fortunate enough to attend the following year (thanks, in large part, to Erik himself). Erik was building a web-based tool – "inthefieldonline" – which allowed citizens to report news and events around them to the wider world through their mobile phones. This, of course, is nothing particularly new today, but back then it was an emerging field and Erik was at the forefront. During the final weeks of his Fellowship in July 2006, Israel invaded Lebanon in response to the kidnapping of one of their soldiers. Erik's tool was picked up by Lebanese civilians, who texted in their experiences, thoughts, hopes and fears through their mobile phones. The international media were quick onto the story, including CNN. Erik's project was propelled into the limelight, resulting in significant funding to develop a new citizen journalism site, allvoices, which he ran until recently.

In a similar vein, it took a national election to significantly raise the profile of FrontlineSMS when it was used to help monitor the Nigerian Presidential elections in 2007. The story was significant in that it was believed to be the first time civil society had helped monitor an election in an African country using mobile technology. As the BBC reported:

> anyone trying to rig or tamper with Saturday's presidential elections in Nigeria could be caught out by a team of volunteers armed with mobile phones

Although FrontlineSMS had already been around for over eighteen months at that time, its use in Nigeria created significant new interest in the software, lead to funding from the MacArthur Foundation and ended with the release of a new version the following summer. The project has gone from strength to strength since.

One of today's most talked-about platforms also emerged from the ashes of another significant event, this time the troubles following Kenya's disputed elections in late 2007. With everyday Kenyans deprived of a voice at the height of the troubles, a team of African developers created a site which allowed citizens to report acts of violence via the web and SMS, incidents which were then aggregated with other reports and displayed on a map. Ushahidi – "witness" in Kiswahili – provided an avenue for everyday people to get their news out, and news of its launch was widely hailed in the mainstream press. The creation of Ushahidi is a textbook study in rapid prototyping and collaboration.

The interesting thing about all these projects is that they all proved that they worked – i.e. proved there was a need and developed a track record – <u>before</u> receiving significant funding. Kiva got out there and showed that their lending platform worked before major funders stepped in, just as FrontlineSMS did. And Ushahidi put the first version of their crowdsourcing site together in just five days, and have reaped the benefits of having that early working prototype ever since. If there is a lesson to learn here then it would have to be this – don't let a lack of funding stop you from getting your ICT4D solution off the ground, even if it does involve "failing fast".

Of course, not everyone can rely on an international emergency to raise the profile of their project or big idea, and it wouldn't be wise to bet on one ever happening, either. But when it does, an obvious lack of a solution to a problem often rises to the surface, creating an environment where tools which do exist – whether they are proven or not – are able to prosper for the benefit of everyone.

ACCIDENTAL APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGIES 🔗

#1: The Amazon Kindle

While growing numbers of people in the development sector get increasingly excited at the potential of tablet computing for health, agriculture, education and other development activities, it's the Amazon Kindle that's been exciting me recently.

The irony is, without really trying, Amazon have built something which more closely resembles an appropriate technology than other organisations who have specifically gone out to try and build one.

So, what makes the Kindle so special?

1. It's light, relatively rugged, and mobile

2. Ten days reading time on one charge

3. One month 'standby' time between charges

4. Solar panel cover option removes the need for mains charging

5. Built-in dictionary and thesaurus

6. Display can be read in bright sunlight

7. Internal storage for up to 200 books

8. No need for the Internet once books are loaded

9. Text-to-speech for illiterate/semi-literate users

10. Costs continue to come down

11. Remote delivery of books and materials (local wi-fi permitting)

Of course, I'm not the first person to notice this. A year or two ago the highlight of an ICT4D conference I attended was a short video showing children in West Africa using Amazon Kindles. I'll never forget how they interacted with the devices, and what having access to one meant to them and their hopes of an education. Not many technologies give us these little glimpses of magic.

Imagine, all the books a child would ever need to see them through their basic education, all packed into a ~$100 device.

The people behind that video were from Worldreader.org, an organisation whose mission is to *"make digital books available to all in the developing world, enabling millions of people to improve their lives".*

We often say in mobiles-for-development that today most people in the developing world will make their first phone call on a mobile, and have their first experience of the Internet on one, too. Perhaps children, in the not-too-distant future, will have their first experience of reading on an e-reader?

WHAT IF APPLE WORKED IN ICT4D? REFLECTIONS ON THE POSSIBLE 🔗

"Two weeks ago, I was staying at a working dairy farm sixty kilometers north of Bogotá, Colombia. I was fiddling around with my iPad when one of the kids that worked in the stables came up to me and started staring at it. He couldn't have been more than six years old, and I'd bet dollars to donuts that he had never used a computer or even a cellular telephone before (Colombia has many attractions. The vast pool of illiterate poor is not one of them)

Curious, I handed him the device and a very small miracle happened. He started using it. I mean, really using it. Almost instantly, he was sliding around, opening and closing applications, playing a pinball game I had downloaded. All without a single word of instruction from me"

Michael Noer, "The Stable Boy and the iPad"

Two questions scream out at me when I read this. Firstly, what would happen if Apple turned a fraction of its attention to ICT4D? And secondly, why **don't** Apple work in ICT4D? In a sector where so many tools and solutions seem to fail because they're too complex, poorly designed, unusable or inappropriate, who better to show us how it should be done than the masters of usability and design?

The answer to the second question is a little easier to answer than the first. As Walter Isaacson pointed out in his recent biography, Steve Jobs felt he could contribute more to the world by 'simply' making brilliant products. He seemed to have little time for philanthropy, at least publicly, and his laser focus meant he saw almost everything other than Apple's mission as a distraction. Ironically, had he decided to give away some of his ballooning wealth, he'd most likely have funded programmes working in nutrition and vegetarianism, not technology, according to Mark Vermilion (who Steve Jobs hired back in 1986 to run the Steven P. Jobs Foundation, which he was destined to shut down a year later).
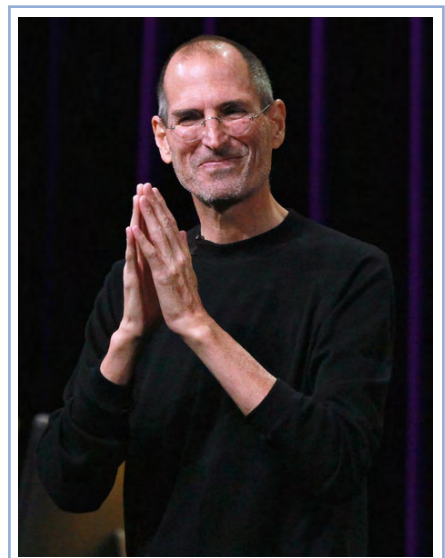
Had Steve Jobs decided to pursue his Foundation, and had he decided to fund technology-based initiatives in the developing world, how well might he have done, and what might Apple have been able to contribute to our discipline?

Here's five initial thoughts on where an Apple approach to ICT4D might be different – or problematic.

1. Consult the user

One of the central tenets of ICT4D is to consult the user before designing or building anything. In business, at least, Apple don't do this. They certainly didn't speak to Colombian farm children, yet they managed to intuitively build something that worked for the six year old Michael Noer met. As Steve Jobs famously said:

> *Our job is to figure out what users are going to want before they do. People don't know what they want until you show it to them. That's why I never rely on market research. Our task is to read things that are not yet on the page*

An Apple ICT4D project would unlikely spend much time, if any, speaking with the target audience, an approach entirely at odds with the one we champion right now.

2. Customer vs. beneficiary

Apple would see people as customers, and they'd be carrying out what they'd see as a commercial transaction with them. This approach would mean they'd **have** to build something the customer wanted, and that worked (and worked well). Since it would have to sell, if successful it would by default be financially sustainable. Part of the problem with the largely subsidised ICT4D "give away technology" model is that no-one is ultimately accountable if things don't work out, and regular business rules do not apply.

3. Open vs. closed

The ICT4D community is entrenched in an open source mindset, almost to the extent that closed solutions are scorned upon. Steve Jobs was a strong believer in controlling all aspects of the user experience, all the way from hardware through to software. To him, closed systems were better "integrated" and open systems "fragmented":
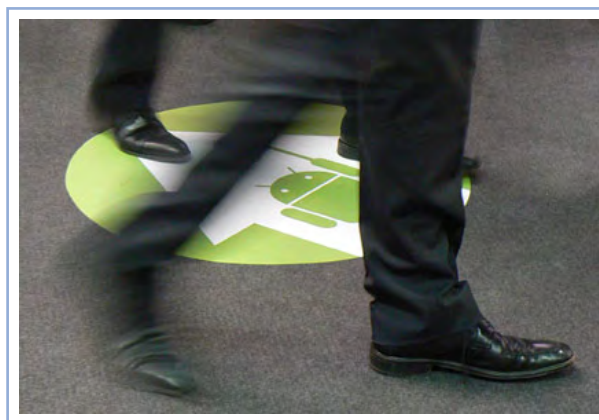
> *What is best for the customer – integrated versus fragmented? We think this is a huge strength of our system versus Google's. When selling to people who want their devices to just work, we think integrated wins every time. We are committed to the integrated approach. We are confident it will triumph over Google's fragmented approach*

There is no evidence in ICT4D, I don't believe, which points towards more success for open solutions vs. closed (however you define *success*), yet open remains dominant. An early Apple success might give us pause for thought.

4. Time for the field

Although Paul Polak doesn't work in ICT4D, he is one the biggest proponents of "getting out into the field to understand the needs of your customer". In his long career he's interviewed over 3,000 people earning a dollar or less a day to better understand their needs – and the market opportunity. In this short video he talks about the process of spending time in rural villages, talking in depth with villagers, and identifying opportunities for transformative impact.

Apple wouldn't see the need to do this because they wouldn't consider the needs of dollar-a-day customers as being any different to anyone else. They'd consider their intuitive design and user interface to be non-culturally specific. People, everywhere, want simple-to-use technologies that just work, regardless of who they are.

5. Appropriate technology

Apple's product line hardly fits into the appropriate technology model – they're expensive, power-hungry and the devices are reliant on a computer (via iTunes) as their central controlling "hub". The systems are also closed, blocking any chance of local innovation around the platform. How Apple tackle this – yet maintain their standards of excellence in design and usability – would probably turn out to be their biggest challenge.

Although it hasn't happened yet, a post-Steve Jobs Apple might yet develop a philanthropic streak. If they did they could easily turn to their friends at frog design (now branded Frog) for help. Frog, who worked closely with them in the early days of the Macintosh range, have recently worked with a number of ICT4D initiatives and organisations, including Project Masiluleke and UNICEF.

Apple have already reinvented the music and publishing industries. With the talent, capital and resources available I'd bet my bottom dollar on them reinventing ICT4D if they chose to. Steve Jobs liked to "live at the intersection of the humanities and technology", and that's exactly the place where ICT4D needs to be.
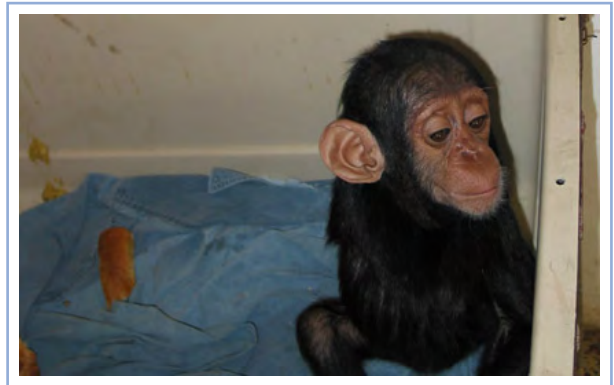
PRIMATES AND PEOPLE: UNDERSTANDING LOCAL NEEDS 🔗

Driven by a curiosity and a strong interest in primate conservation, late one night back in December 2001 I arrived in Nigeria to take up my post as Project Manager at a sanctuary in Calabar, Cross River State. The year I spent there – starting exactly ten years ago this month – turned out to be fascinating and frustrating in equal measure. Crucially, combined with my previous experiences working on the continent, it also helped shape my understanding of the needs of local people and local NGOs, a focus which remains a central pillar of my wider technology work today.

I wasn't the only arrival that December day. A small baby chimpanzee had been confiscated *(pictured)* from a local market and was waiting to be collected from Lekki, a conservation and education centre in Lagos run by the Nigerian Conservation Foundation. Primate rescue was to be a theme of my time in Nigeria, as was a sense that a large part of the 'conservation effort' was really damage limitation and control. Rehabilitating orphaned primates was often the easier part – even though it was hugely challenging and distressing. Changing perceptions, overcoming local politics and trying to shift cultural mindsets turns out to be much harder. Not only that, it takes considerably longer, time that increasing numbers of species simply don't have.

Primate conservation, bush meat hunting and deforestation are all inextricably linked. Tackling one without trying to address the others simply doesn't work. In its simplest form, the whole thing goes something like this.

Loggers enter the forest and either blanket cut or selectively cut trees. To help get the logs out, paths and roads are opened up into areas which were previously difficult or impossible to access. Loggers need to eat, and many actively hunt for bush meat while working in the forest. Local hunters join in. As more trees are cut and more roads laid, hunters are able to penetrate deeper into the forest, reducing wildlife populations – primates included – yet further

If I were to summarise what I learnt about these complex issues from my time in southern Nigeria, I would break it down into the following categories.

The practical

Although large-scale logging is a significant problem – often carried out by larger (almost always foreign) companies – many poor local people are 'recruited' to help in the destruction. Equipped with chainsaws supplied by their employers, they enter community forests and national parks and selectively cut high-worth trees. Roads and paths are cut to remove the logs, which are sometimes cut into large planks before being shipped off. Forestry officials, many of whom haven't been paid for months, stamp the trees as coming from a legitimate source. I will never forget the haunting sound of distant chainsaws as I walked through those forests.

The cultural

Speaking with the locals in Calabar, many find it inconceivable that people would ever eat primates. In many communities it's simply taboo, but sadly the same can't be said for killing them. As outsiders come in search of work, and as main roads open up alongside the fringes of rainforest, hunters from these communities will go in, track down wildlife – primates included – and sell them at the side of the the road. Bush meat is in great demand, and it's a brisk trade. If a mother is killed then the infant will be sold as a pet – a double bounty for the hunter. Some of these orphans are incredibly young, and barely alive if they are lucky enough to be rescued, as this picture distressingly shows.


The perception

The many Nigerians I met believed that bush meat was much better for you than 'farmed' meat, and given the choice they'd rather eat something from the forest than a farm. This is a major challenge for conservation groups trying to ween people off bush meat and more towards livestock of various descriptions. As a case in point, some Nigerians living in London appear to be willing to pay significant amounts of money for illegally imported bush meat, despite the availability of almost any other kind of meat from legal, local sources such as London supermarkets (see this interesting story reported by the International Primate Protection League).

The response

Conservation groups on the ground spend huge amounts of time on education and alternative livelihoods and farming programmes. In the 1990's there was considerable focus on the potential for "grasscutters" – a widely-distributed cane rat found in West and Central Africa – and how farming and breeding these could help reduce or replace reliance on bush meat for protein. I'm not sure how many of these projects were successful, although some research has been carried out and there has been some success by individuals in Ghana. From my own observations, keeping livestock of any kind (other than chickens or turkeys, which need little looking after) turned out to be a foreign concept to many people, and efforts to promote it largely failed.

The reality

Speak with the hunters in almost any rural community and there is almost universal recognition that the wildlife is on the decline. Many fondly speak of overnight hunting expeditions with their fathers, and how they'd return the next morning with a healthy 'catch'. Evidence of distant permanent overnight camps highlight today's reality – longer trips, days in length, but ones which still don't guarantee a single kill. Urban dwellers rarely see this reality. Ask them about conservation and wildlife, and their reaction is one of "the monkeys will never finish" (Nigerians often use the term "finish" to describe extinction). Nigerians clearly have much to learn from each other.
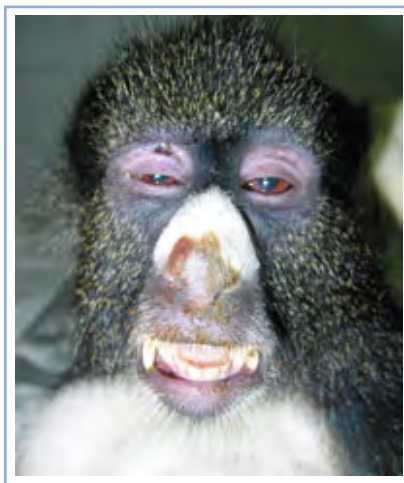
It would have been great to have ended my time in Nigeria with a solution to some of these problems, and even better to be able to outline a few of them in this post. But I didn't, and I don't.

What I can contribute, though, is this…

Things you can do

Firstly, take a little time to try and understand the problems – plural. It frustrates me to read blanket condemnation in the western media of local people in African countries cutting down forests and daring to kill cute chimpanzees. Yes, it's sad and its destructive. I've seen at first hand the pain and distress of an orphaned primate who's had to have an arm broken to release its grip on its dead mother, or the look in the eyes of exhausted villagers struggling to put a decent meal on the table for their children. The problems are complex, but they're human *and* animal.

Secondly, join a local organisation working with local communities *on the ground*. If you're interested in African primates in particular, a good place to start out is the Pan African Sanctuary Alliance (PASA), an organisation committed to the conservation and care of African primates through the support of *in-situ* sanctuaries.

Thirdly, if you're the volunteering kind, check out the University of Wisconsin's Primate Info Net, but bear in mind that volunteering is really only productive if the local organisation can't find, or afford, a local version of you among the communities in which they work. If that's the case, be sure you have a *transferrable skill* so you can train a local person to replace you when you leave. Sustainability isn't always financial – it also has a human element to it, too.

Fourthly, find out about alternative conservation/human strategies such as direct conservation payments – different models do exist. Just as primate species are different, conservation strategies also need to be. One size rarely fits all, and this is true whether you're an elephant, a forest, a primate or a local villager.

Finally, stay positive. Problems are many and working solutions are few. Something good will happen if enough people commit to conservation in Africa. Many people already have.

ADVICE FOR SOCIAL INNOVATORS AT HEART 🔗

For the past two years I've been incredibly fortunate to work with some of the most inspirational, talented social innovators (aka Pop!Tech Social Innovation Fellows). This year, good friend Erik Hersman and I returned to Camden, Maine to work with the 2011 Class. Sharing our own experiences of 2008 – when we were both Fellows – and lessons we've learnt on our journey is a large part of why we're here.

Here's a brief summary of twelve of the key lessons I shared with the Fellows before the retreat wrapped up earlier today.

1. Don't be in a hurry. Grow your organisation on your own terms.

2. **Don't assume you need money to grow. Do what you can before you reach out to external funders.**

3. Volunteers and Interns may not be the silver bullet to your human resource issues.

4. **Pursue and maximise every opportunity to promote your work.**

5. Remember that your website, for most people, is the primary window to you and your idea.

6. **Know when to say "no". Manage expectations.**

7. Avoid being dragged down by the politics of the industry you're in. Save your energy for more important things.

8. **Learn to do what you can't afford to pay other people to do.**

9. Be open with the values that drive you.

10. **Collaborate if it's in the best interests of solving your problem, even if it's not in your best interests.**

11. Make full use of your networks, and remember that the benefits of being in them may not always be immediate.

12. Remember the bigger picture.

RETHINKING SOCIALLY RESPONSIBLE DESIGN IN A MOBILE WORLD 🔗

"The Curry Stone Design Prize was created to champion designers as a force for social change. Now in its fourth year, the Prize recognizes innovators who address critical issues involving clean air, food and water, shelter, health care, energy, education, social justice or peace".

Yesterday was an exciting day for us as we announced FrontlineSMS had won the prestigious 2011 Curry Stone Design Prize. This award follows closely on the heels of the 2011 Pizzigati Prize, an honourable mention at the Buckminster Fuller Challenge and our National Geographic "Explorer" Award last summer. It goes without saying these are exciting times not just for FrontlineSMS but for our growing user base and the rapidly expanding team behind it. When I think back to the roots of our work in the spring of 2005, FrontlineSMS almost comes across as *"the little piece of software that dared to dream big".*

With the exception of the Pizzigati Prize – which specifically focuses on open source software for public good – our other recent awards are particularly revealing. Last summer we began something of a trend by being awarded things which weren't traditionally won by socially-focused mobile technology organisations.

Being named a 2010 National Geographic Emerging Explorer is a case in point, and last summer while I was in Washington DC collecting the prize I wrote down my thoughts in a blog post:

On reflection, it was a very bold move by the Selection Committee. Almost all of the other Emerging Explorers are either climbing, diving, scaling, digging or building, and what I do hardly fits into your typical adventurer job description. But in a way it does. As mobile technology continues its global advance, figuring out ways of applying the technology in socially and environmentally meaningful ways is a kind of 21st century exploring. The public reaction to the Award has been incredible, and once people see the connection they tend to think differently about tools like FrontlineSMS and their place in the world.

More recently we've begun receiving recognition from more traditional socially-responsible design organisations – Buckminster Fuller and Clifford Curry/Delight Stone. If you ask the man or woman on the street what "socially responsible design" meant to them, most would associate it with physical design – the building or construction of *things*, more-to-the-point. Water containers, purifiers, prefabricated buildings, emergency shelters, storage containers and so on. Design is so much easier to recognise, explain and appreciate if you can **see** it. Software is a different beast altogether, and that's what makes our Curry Stone Design Prize most interesting. As the prize website itself puts it:

> *Design has always been concerned with built environment and the place of people within it, but too often has limited its effective reach to narrow segments of society. The Curry Stone Design Prize is intended to support the expansion of the reach of designers to a wider segment of humanity around the globe, making talents of leading designers available to broader sections of society.*

Over the past few years FrontlineSMS has become so much more than just a piece of software. Our core values are hard-coded into how the software works, how it's deployed, the things it can do, how users connect, and the way it allows all this to happen. We've worked hard to build a tool which *anyone* can take and, without us needing to get involved, applied to any problem anywhere. How this is done is entirely up to the user, and it's this flexibility that sits at the core of the platform. It's also arguably at the heart of it's success:

We trust our users – rely on them, in fact – to be **imaginative** and **innovative** with the platform. If they succeed, we succeed. If they fail, we fail. We're all very much in this together. We focus on the people and not the technology because it's people who own the problems, and by default they're often the ones best-placed to solve them. When you lead with *people*, technology is relegated to the position of being a *tool*. Our approach to empowering our users isn't rocket science. As I've written many times before, it's usually quite subtle, but it works:

> *My belief is that users don't want **access** to tools – they want to be **given** the tools. There's a subtle but significant difference. They want to have **their own** system, something which works with **them** to solve **their** problem. They want to **see** it, to have it **there** with them, not in some "cloud". This may sound petty – people wanting something of their own – but I believe that this is one way that works.*

What recognition from the likes of the Curry Stone Design Prize tells us is that socially responsible design <u>can</u> be increasingly applied to the solutions, people and ecosystems built around lines of code – but only if those solutions are user-focused, sensitive to their needs, deploy appropriate technologies and allow communities to influence how these tools are applied to the problems <u>they</u> own.

WHEN IN ROME. OR AFRICA

Whenever I find myself in front of a group of students, or young people aspiring to work in development, I'm usually asked to share one piece of advice with them. I usually go with this: Get out there while you can and understand the context of the people you aspire to help. As you get older the reality is that it becomes harder to travel for extended periods, or to randomly go and live overseas.

In the early days of ICT4D and m4d – and development more broadly – it may have been seen as a luxury to understand the context of your target users (many solutions were seen as "universal", after all). Today I'd say it's become a necessity.

In my earlier days I did a lot of travel, mostly to and around Africa. (One thing I regret never managing to do was walk across the continent, something I started tentatively planning a few years ago). As our organisation has grown and my role within it changed, I spend more time today travelling to conferences giving talks than actually *doing* the work. My last major piece of extended fieldwork (i.e. longer than a week) was back in the summer of 2007 when I spent a month in Uganda consulting with Grameen's fledgling AppLab.

There's more to it, though, than just "getting out there". What you learn, sense, pick up and appreciate about the place you're in and the people you're with largely depends on the kind of traveller you are. The truth of the matter is you'll rarely get a real sense of a place staying for just a few days in the capital city behind the walls of a four or five star hotel. Quite often the more you get out of your comfort zone the more you learn.

I've been hugely fortunate to have lived and worked in many countries – mostly in Africa – since I set out to work in development almost twenty years ago. And during that time I've developed quite a few "travel habits" to help me get the most out of my time there.
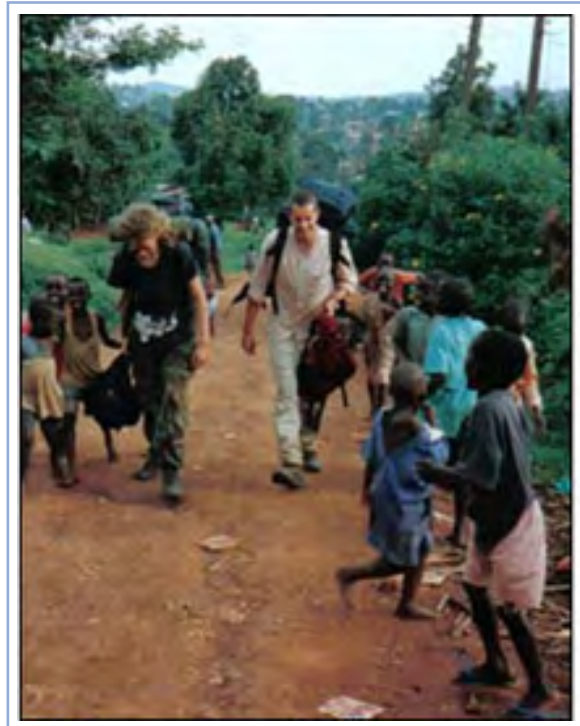
Here's my Top 15:

1. Stay in a locally-owned or run hotel (or even better, guest house).

2. Spend as much time as possible on foot. Draw a map.

3. Get out of the city.

4. Check out the best places to watch Premiership football.

5. Ignore health warnings (within reason) and eat in local cafes/markets.

6. Buy local papers, listen to local radio, watch local TV, visit local cinemas.

7. Use public transport. Avoid being 'chauffeured' around.

8. Take a camera. Take your time taking pictures.

9. Go for at least a month.

10. Visit villages on market days.

11. Spend time in local bookshops, libraries and antique/art shops.

12. Read up on the history and background of where you're going. Buy a locally-written history and geography book.

13. Be sure to experience the city on foot, at night.

14. Wherever you are, get up for a sunrise stroll. It's a different, fascinating (and cooler) time of day.

15. Don't over-plan. Be open to unexpected opportunities.

ANTHROPOLOGISTS IN A GLOBAL VILLAGE

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Social anthropology was a discipline I was fortunate to stumble into when I headed to university way back in 1996. My main motive for going was to read Development Studies, but at Sussex you couldn't study it as a single subject. Choices for a second ranged from English Literature to Spanish to Geography. I rather casually picked anthropology.

If I were to be honest, for much of the first year I struggled. I never could get my head around the intricacies of *"Kinship, Gender and Social Reproduction"*. It wasn't until we shifted focus in the second year towards applied anthropology that it all began to fall into place. Grounding the discipline in the problems and challenges of 'modern' life helped frame how useful, relevant and outright interesting it could be. By the time I graduated my main two pieces of work had focused on the role of anthropologists in the creation of conservation areas and national parks, and language death (including attempts to "revive" threatened languages such as Manx and Jerriais).

When people first come across our work they usually hone straight in on the "anthropology" in the strapline. Many people seem genuinely fascinated by what anthropologists could ever be doing working in mobiles-for-development, or ICT4D more broadly. It's a good question. This is how I answered in a recent interview with National Geographic (this is one of a number of possible answers):

How are anthropologists exploring the enormous impacts of technology in the developing world?

Today, with markets saturated in the 'developed world' – if we can call it that – manufacturers are increasingly turning their attention to the two billion or so consumers left on the planet who don't yet own a phone. Many of these people sit at the "bottom of the pyramid" (BOP) as economists like to call it, and many have very different needs from a mobile phone.

Manufacturers looking to build devices for the BOP need to very carefully consider price, which is often a crucial factor for someone with very limited disposable income. They might also need to consider literacy levels, or technical ability, perhaps re-working the user interface on the phone to make it easier to use.

They might also need to consider building phones which can take multiple SIM cards, since many people in the developing world regularly switch between different networks before making calls to take advantage of special deals. And

they might need to think about providing security and privacy features on the phone which allows it to be shared between family members, something else which is very common in developing countries.

Understanding what these users might need or want from a phone needs time in the field, and researchers need to immerse themselves in the consumer, their lives and their phone usage patterns. Often it's simply a case of patient, participant observation rather than just going in asking a bunch of questions, and anthropologists are particularly well suited to this kind of work.

Back in the summer of 2008 I was approached by researchers from the Department of Anthropology at the University of North Texas. They were working on a book chapter which looked at how anthropologists were contributing to the development of technologies that addressed the challenges of globalisation. Their focus was principally on consumer uses of technology, not organisational, and how anthropologists were melding theory and practice in the technology space, or "Global Village".

After much work, that book – "**Applying Anthropology in the Global Village**" – is about to hit the shelves. For anyone interested in how anthropology can be usefully applied in the modern world, this is a must-read. kiwanja's early work which lead to the development of FrontlineSMS is featured in the chapter on "Localising the Global in Technology Design".
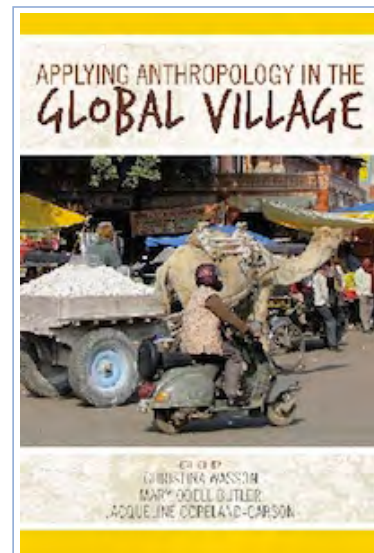
A comment from one of the reviewers sums up the book's contribution well:

> *Once in a generation comes a shift in the practice of anthropology, or perhaps a shift in our perspective on the place of practice in the discipline and in the world. Here is a harbinger of such change – the book we have all been waiting for – taking us to the cutting-edge of an anthropological practice that is 'globalised', hybridised with other disciplines, technology-infused, and on the go 24/7. A remarkable collection, this volume provides prospective and retrospective views of the agglomerative power of anthropology in the halls of global practice – influencing policy on global climate change, gendering our knowledge of mobility around the world, explaining the reason for technology 'grey markets' in developing nations, revealing the concept of 'plastic time' and so much more. It will challenge what you thought you knew about 'applied anthropology'*

If you're interested in working in ICT4D and would rather focus on the "D", you could do a lot worse than study anthropology. This book could well be the perfect place to start.

APPROPRIATE TECHNOLOGY: LESSONS FROM NATURE

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"Our life is half natural and half technological. Half-and-half is good. You cannot deny that high-tech is progress. We need it for jobs. Yet if you make only high-tech, you make war. So we must have a strong human element to keep modesty and natural life"

Nam June Paik, Artist (1932 – 2006)

There's a saying in the technology world which asks "What would Google do?". When I'm confronted with a problem, I'd rather ask "What would nature do?". Why? Well, if you believe Google have the answer then you're immediately assuming that modern technology – in some shape or form – is the solution. More often than not that's the wrong place to start.

I recently sat on a panel at the Aspen Environment Forum which focused on the use of social media in the environmental movement. Many people had already made their minds up that Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and so on were 'the' answer, before really thinking through what they were really trying to do, what their message was, or who the different audiences would be. That's also the wrong place to start.

@NatGeoGreen
NatGeo Green

.@kiwanja: Social media useful, but not always best to get a msg out. "The answer to your problem might be a crayon." #aef201

Asking what nature might do immediately pulls us away from looking for a modern, high-tech solution and more towards a simpler, low-tech (and potentially more appropriate and sustainable) one. It also encourages us to think entirely out-of-the-box.

So, if you were to ask "What might nature do?", what kind of solutions might you come up with which you otherwise might not have?

1. Elephants

Some of my earliest mobile work back in 2003 was in Southern Africa where I was asked to help understand and apply modern communications technology to local conservation efforts. One of the bigger problems people were trying to tackle back then was human-elephant conflict – elephants 'encroaching' on farmland and destroying livelihoods literally overnight. In response, some farmers resorted to poisoning or shooting elephants. Not a good conservation outcome.

All kinds of modern technology solutions were proposed, and many trialled, to try and solve the problem. Electric fences, RFID tagging, sensors and live-GSM-tracking among them. Few proved as successful as hoped, or particularly replicable or affordable.

So, what might nature do?

It turns out that elephants run a mile when they encounter bees. According to this BBC article, early research in Kenya indicates hives can be a very effective barrier, so much so that 97% of attempted elephant raids were aborted. Where satellites, RFID tags and mobile phones failed, humble honey bees might just be the answer.

2. Pigeons

Each summer, as tennis players battle it out on the lawn courts at Wimbledon, the authorities do battle trying to stop pigeons interfering with play. All manner of modern technology is available to deter birds – lasers and radio controlled aircraft to gas guns and ultrasound emitters. Again, each have varying degrees of success and many can be expensive.

What would nature do?

Wimbledon's answer doesn't involve anything more high-tech than a bird of prey. A few laps by Rufus around the tennis courts are enough to scare the hardiest of pigeons away. No batteries – or lasers, or sound emitters – required. Simple, sustainable and replicable.

3. Wasps

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the grandly-named "Waspinator" was a little black box with wires, buttons and flashing lights. No doubt there <u>have</u> been attempts to develop high-tech wasp deterrents in the past, but the Waspinator isn't one of them. In fact, if you saw one you'd likely be a little disappointed. This particular solution looks like nothing more than a brown paper bag. *But don't be fooled – nature has very much influenced its development.*

According to the website:

The Waspinator is a fake wasps nest. Wasps are very territorial and will aggressively defend their nest against wasps from another colony. When a foraging wasp sees another wasps nest it will rapidly leave the area for fear of being attacked by the nest's defenders.

Wasps have a very long range of vision and when they see a Waspinator they think it's an enemy wasps nest and quickly leave the area for somewhere safer, leaving the area around the Waspinator completely free of wasps

It couldn't be simpler. And no moving parts (if you exclude the wasps).

So, drawing on these examples, what five lessons does nature teach us?

1. Understand the context of your target audience/user.

2. Use locally available materials wherever possible.

3. Low-tech is not poor-tech.

4. Keep it simple.

5. The answer is likely already out there.

Next time we look to develop a technology solution to a problem, we might be best asking what nature might do before turning to the likes of Google, or any high-tech solution provider for that matter. Mother Nature usually knows best.

# THE ROLLING STONES SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT INNOVATION 🔗

What do the Rolling Stones and FrontlineSMS have in common? Not much, you might think. Well, they're not users, they're a little better-off than us and they're considerably more famous. But there is something a little more subtle we share with them – management innovation.

In his autobiography – "Life" – published last year, Keith Richards describes the evolution of The Rolling Stones' management. Three quite distinct individuals played key roles in getting the band to where they are today. From an article last November in The Week magazine:

> *"First up was Andrew Loog Oldham – described as an oddity of the London music scene – who successfully branded The Stones as the "dirty, snarling and mean" antidote to the then clean-cut Beatles. Then came Allen Klein, a lawyer expert in negotiating with record companies. Finally, there was Prince Rupert Lowenstein, a private banker with no roots in the music industry, who professionalised the outfit – establishing separate companies to handle publishing, merchandising and touring – which made The Stones one of the richest bands in history"*
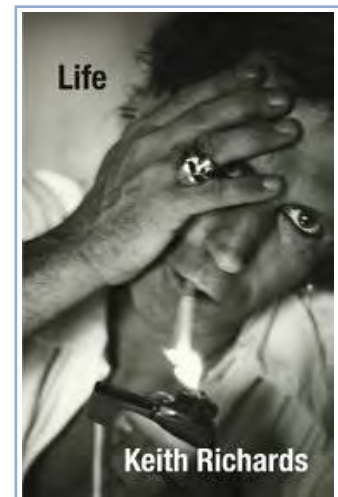
The evolution and management of FrontlineSMS can also be broken down into three phases:

- **Technology innovation**

- **Organisational innovation**

- **Business model innovation**

As The Stones example demonstrates, each phase requires a very different skill set, and it would take an extraordinary individual to be able to manage and deliver successfully on each. While I may have been the right person – in the right place at the right time at the very least – to successfully deliver on Phase One, that doesn't mean I'm the right person for Phase Two, or Three. A large part of building a successful organisation is assembling a talented, diverse team with complementary skill sets. Identifying gaps and being honest about our own strengths and weaknesses is a large part of the process.

The social entrepreneurship sector, however, remains largely laser-focused on the innovator, the person behind Phase One. Recognising that organisations

develop in phases, and have different needs at each, there needs to be a slight shift in how we view – and support – entrepreneurs and the vehicles or organisations they help create.

With this in mind, there might well be a few things the social entrepreneurship sector could learn from The Rolling Stones.

THREE OBJECTS THAT DEFINE 🔗

House moves are always fun, particularly the things that re-emerge from old boxes years after they've been buried away. While most of it turns out to be useless, unwanted junk, sometimes you stumble across something which ended up having a bigger impact on your life than you ever imagined. Here are three objects, recently unearthed, which have done that for me.

Writing

I must have been about 10 or 11 years old when my mother bought me an old, ridiculously heavy Olympus typewriter from the "Under £10" section of our local newspaper . It was my first ever typewriter – I later 'upgraded' to a new model from Boots once I'd saved up enough money from my paper round – and I don't remember much of any conversation we had before she bought it. But what I do know is that it unleashed my passion for writing. Homework was never the same again, and I must have written the majority of my poems on it, something I did a lot of in my younger years.

In 1978, the Amoco Cadiz ran aground off the Channel Islands, and for several months I took an unusually strong interest in the subject of oil – how it was found, where it came from, how much was left, how often spills happened, and so on. The culmination of this fascination was a 'research project' bound in a small A5 folder, imaginatively entitled "Oil: By Kenneth Banks", which I still have to this day.

Today, writing remains a passion and is an important expressive outlet for me and my work. I'd never have imagined back in those days that I would end up writing for the BBC website, or PC World. I have a lot to thank that Olympus for. And my Mum, of course.

Computing

There was never really much to do on the estate where I was brought up, so the opening of a local club by Mr. Cooper was a main outlet for many of the children. It was a big estate, however, and the club had a waiting list. When I did eventually get the nod to join, Mr. Cooper had been using Commodore PET computers for some time in his other job – helping children with learning difficulties. During

club hours we were allowed to play games on the PET, and were allocated around ten minutes each because of the high demand.

These amazing machines were powered by cassette players, and we quickly learnt the two commands we needed to use them. "LOAD" loaded the game, and when that was complete, "RUN" would execute it. I knew there had to be more to it than that, so during my short spells at the screen I'd try and figure out what else I could do. "LIST" was a revelation – a command to display the code. I soon realised that if I changed anything here, if it didn't break the program it made it do something else. A programming career was born.

After a short while I was writing my own teaching programs for Mr. Cooper and earning extra pocket money from it. I have a lot to thank him for. Computers were hugely expensive in those days, and he gave me the opportunity to learn something which was only just starting to be taught in schools. Without this, a central pillar of my work today would never have been formed, and it's highly unlikely I'd ever have been able to talk my way into an IT career, which I later did.

Travelling

By 1993 I was out of school and – thanks to Mr. Cooper and a few other lucky breaks – working in the local IT industry. I'd already decided that a career in finance wasn't for me. By a few twists of fate I found myself on a Jersey Overseas Aid project that summer, helping build teaching accommodation in Northern Zambia. It was a life-changing experience, and took my life and career into a totally new and unexpected direction. An interest and fascination – and later, career – in development was born over those few short weeks, and I'm still as engaged in it as ever, 17 years on.

Since that first trip I've had the pleasure and honour to live and work in a number of other African countries – Uganda, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, Mozambique, Kenya among them – and have made some incredible friends and even more incredible friendships along the way.

By September 1993, the month I returned from Zambia, the impact that trip was to have on my life was still largely unknown. Which makes it even more remarkable – perhaps strange – is that I kept a pair of socks from that first visit wrapped in a sheet of newspaper. These socks resurfaced during my recent house move. Some of my very first steps on the African continent are bound up in that marvellous red dust.

So there you have it. Three objects and three meanings that have helped define a life. Funny when you look at it like that.
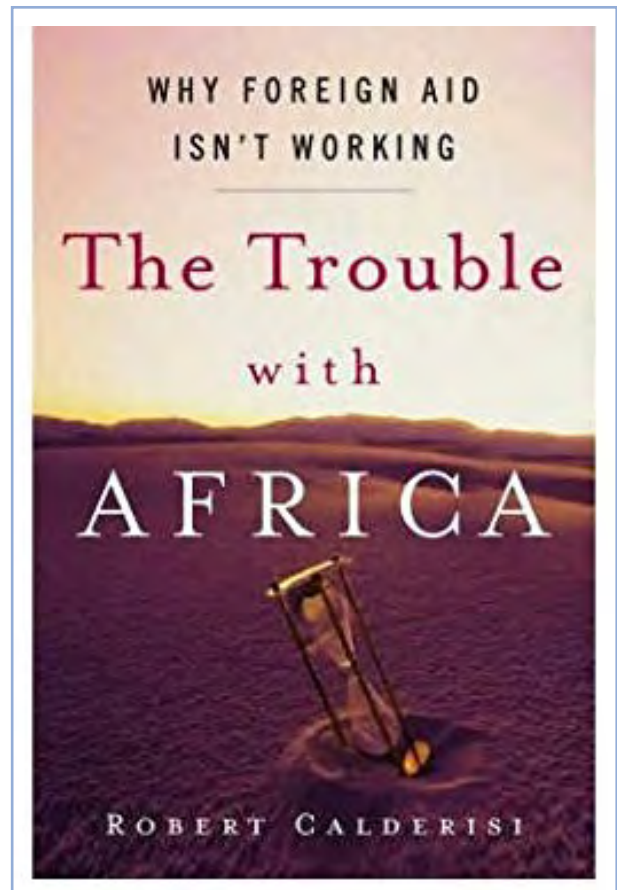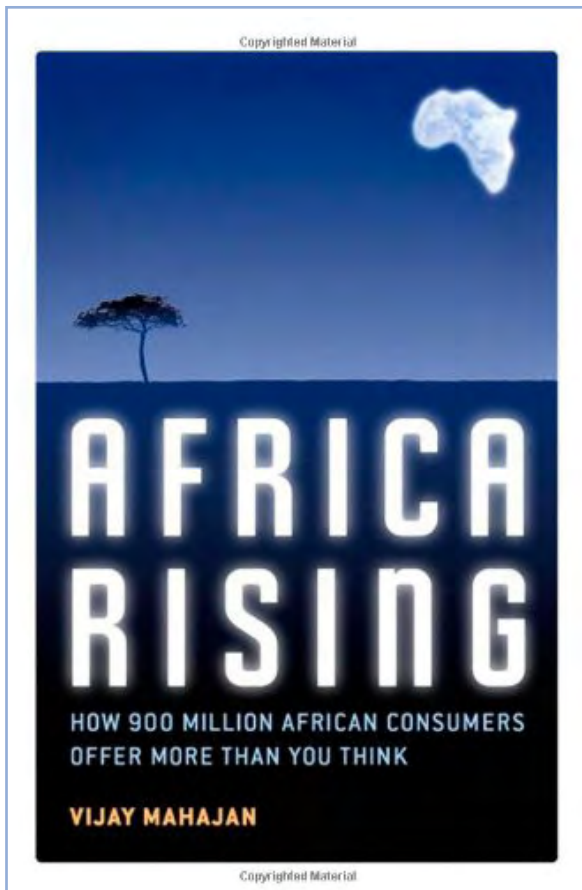
What three objects define you?

THE TWO FACES OF AFRICAN LITERATURE

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The positive. The negative. The upbeat. The downbeat. The optimistic. The pessimistic. The African view. The Western view. The good. The bad. The "half full". The "half empty".

The two faces of African literature?

SOCIAL MOBILE AND THE MISSING METRICS

🔗

Scenario 1: Five hundred people gather together for three days. They talk, they discuss, they share and they learn. And then they leave. Some stay in touch, others have picked up enough to start a project of their own. Others just leave with a satisfied curiosity, others with the odd new blog post behind them

Scenario 2: A charitable foundation funds the creation of a new mobile tool. Over a one year period there is software development, a new website, user testing and roll-out

Scenario 3: A university professor embarks on a piece of field-based research to examine the impact of a mobile-based health initiative in Africa. He or she writes a paper, highlights what did and didn't work, gets it published and presents it at a conference

Question: What do these three scenarios have in common?
Answer: It's unlikely we'll ever know their full, or real, impact

Let's assume, for one moment, that everyone working in social mobile wants to see their work have real, tangible impact on the ground. That would equate to:

- *A patient receiving health information through their phone which can be directly attributed to improving their health, or their likelihood of staying alive*

- *A farmer receiving agricultural information which can be directly attributed to better family nutrition, or an increase in income or standard of living*

- *A team of human rights activist reporting violations which can be directly attributed to the fall of an evil regime, or the passing of new legislation, or the saving of a specific person's life*

- *And so on…*

Fine. But are things ever this clear cut? Ever this black or white?

The social mobile world is full of anecdotes. Qualitative data on how certain services in certain places have been used to apparent great effect by end-users. But what we so often lack is the *quantitive* data which donors and critics clamour for. You know – *real*

numbers. Take the 2007 Nigerian Presidential elections, an event close to my own heart because of the role of FrontlineSMS. This year – 2010 – will witness another election in Nigeria. What was the lasting impact of the 2007 mobile election monitoring project? Will things be done any differently this year because of it? Did it have any long-term impact on behaviour, or anti-corruption efforts?

Much of the data we have on FrontlineSMS falls into the anecdotal and qualitative categories. Like many – maybe most – mobile-based projects, we have a lot of work to do in determining the very real, on-the-ground impact of our technology on individuals. We regularly write and talk about these challenges. But it's not just about having the funding or the time to do it. It's figuring out <u>how</u> we measure it.

If a farmer increases his income through a FrontlineSMS-powered agriculture initiative, for example, but then spends that extra money on beer, that's hardly a positive outcome. But it is if he passes it to his wife who then uses it to send their third or fourth daughter to school. How on earth do we track this, make sense of it, monitor it, measure it, or even decide how we do all of these things? Do we even need bother at all?

Of course, as my recent Tweet suggests, we shouldn't get too obsessed with the data. But it's important that we don't forget it altogether, either. We need to recognise the scale of the challenge – not just us as software developers or innovators, but also

"Empathy ensures that our goal of serving people doesn't get lost in the data". Great quote from IDEO at Change That Counts

9:44 PM Nov 20th from Echofon
Retweeted by 1 person

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kiwanja
Ken Banks

the mobile conference or workshop organiser, and the professor, both of whom need to face up to exactly the same set of questions. The case of the missing metrics applies just as much to one as it does to the others, and we all need to be part of finding the answer.

MECHANICS VS. MOTIVATION: THE TWO FACES OF SOCIAL INNOVATION 🔗

It's been a busy and interesting few weeks, and I've met many people interested in many of the subjects which also fascinate me – entrepreneurship, *social* entrepreneurship, innovation, Africa, mobile technology and appropriate technology, among others. Being on the road is my equivalent of the town hall meeting, of door-to-door canvassing. It's a great way – maybe the only way – to stay connected with the grassroots and meet the up-and-coming innovators of the future. I'm beginning to realise I enjoy speaking much more *outside* tech circles than *within* them. We need to introduce social mobile to **new** audiences, after all, rather than continually preach to the converted.

So, what am I learning from all of this? Most of the younger people I meet want stories. Sure, they want to know some of the theory, a little about the technology. But what resonates more than anything is the background to our tools and where we get our drive and motivation from. They want to resonate, to feel closer to the possibilities and potential, to see themselves in our shoes. They want to walk away with "Well, they did it. Why can't I?".

This was most apparent during talks to students and faculty at Mills College, the University of San Francisco, Santa Clara University and Stanford, all packed into a three week marathon trip to the West Coast at the end of last month. What struck me were the two approaches I often witnessed to spreading the 'innovation' and 'social entrepreneurship' message. While one seems to focus on mechanics, the other focuses on motivation. Let me explain.

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One or two of the events I recently attended have focused on the *mechanics* of innovation and entrepreneurship. This world centres on business models, the quest for data, for metrics and an obsession on measuring impact. Lots of tables, numbers, graphs, theories. The very things which score low on most people's motivational scale. This quote, from Aaron Sklar at IDEO (which I tweeted from the conference), sums up the downside of this approach perfectly.

There certainly seems to be a mismatch between the way social innovation is taught, and the realities of how most social innovators innovate. The 'a-ha' moment innovators-to-be hear about is rarely the discovery of a new metric, or a new business model, or a new way of presenting or collecting data. It's the realisation that a problem *can* be solved, and solved in a new way. These answers often come by *doing* and *experiencing*, being out in the field, and there are almost always stories behind why the person was there, sometimes how they got there, and what they suddenly saw which gave them their big idea.

If I'm totally honest, I find the mechanical approach a total turn-off. It grinds me down and saps any enthusiasm I have for technology and innovation. That's not to say it's not important – it's vital, in fact – but you can always figure out that stuff later, once you have your big idea. No big idea, no need to worry.

Innovation and entrepreneurship start with passion, so we ought to focus more on that. We can help by speaking about our own interests, passions and stories – which most of us have – and less on the mechanical stuff (some of which, incidentally, includes the actual technology we've invented). This is why, I think, people tend to resonate more with individuals who succeed, rather than bigger organisations. Take the Tech Awards last month. Over a dozen *people* – **not** companies – who have found a way to make a difference. The celebration of their achievements would have been less remarkable if they'd all been housed in resource-rich environments. Innovation out of scarcity is what seems to <u>really</u> excite people.

Al Gore spoke at the Tech Awards gala. After a thirty minute speech not a single person could doubt his passion and commitment to the climate change cause, whether or not you agree with him. And hardly any mention of the intricacies of the science. This was a motivational speech if ever there was one. Somehow, if he'd focused on the mechanics I doubt he'd have had half the impact. Al Gore has taken a complex subject and made it accessible, and that has to be one of his major achievements.

We need to do the same with entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, technology and innovation. These subjects need to be demystified, and we need to put passion back where it belongs. And, in my mind, that's ahead of just about everything else – business models, graphs and metrics included.

DILEMMAS OF INNOVATION AND INVISIBILITY

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Northern Zambia, August 1993. We set off from Chilubula – where we were helping build a school – for another village a couple of hours away. They didn't have a school. They didn't seem to have much, in fact. As our pick-up approached, children ran out to greet us, throwing themselves onto their knees. Many of them saw us as saviours, visitors from afar who had the power to build them schools, drill them wells and change their lives in unimaginable ways.

While some people enjoyed the attention, for me it was an uncomfortable experience. It may be hard to <u>not</u> be the "white man in Africa" when you're white and in Africa, but that doesn't mean you have to behave like one. Humility is lacking in so many walks of life, yet a lack of it seemed even more misguided in the environment in which we'd found ourselves.

Since then, on my many trips – they've ranged from as brief as a week to as long as a year – I always grapple with visibility, the feeling that whatever we do it should never be about us. How do we facilitate the change we want to see without being so totally central to it? I remember Jerry, a colleague at a primate sanctuary in Nigeria where I worked in 2002, towing me along to meetings with government officials because "white faces opened doors". I always went along, but insisted he did all the talking. They were his plans, his ideas, and it would have been wrong for me to take any of the credit for them.

Jerry organised an incredible environment day in Calabar that year. He's managed to do the same every year since. The doors thankfully stayed open. Job done, perhaps.

The dilemma of visibility has been with me from the very beginning – 1993 – and I still grapple with it today. I don't have the answer, but I do know that putting end-users first at *every* opportunity is the right thing for *me* to do. Create tools that enable other people to head off in any direction <u>they</u> choose increases the distance between me and their solution. That's what they

Making a lasting contribution to social change:

Mobile empowerment and the art of invisibility

Ken Banks
Founder

kiwanja.net
where technology meets anthropology, conservation and development

[http://twitter.com/kiwanja

want – independence, empowerment on <u>their</u> terms, credit for <u>their</u> actions – and doing it this way gives a little of the invisibility we seek, too.

Not having intimate knowledge of every single thing FrontlineSMS users are doing with the software may be a challenge when it comes to funding and reporting, but it has everything to do with trust, respect and genuine empowerment. It's not until you try to do something like this that you realise how difficult it is to achieve. I don't think enough people really know how to "let go". Too much innovation and too much noise still centres around the technology and not in the approach. Maybe it's time we saw a little "innovation in the way we innovate".

Development is littered with contradictions, and my work is no exception. These things still trouble me, but at least I believe we're on the right path – not just technically, but more importantly, spiritually.

NOKIA: BANKING ON FINANCIAL SERVICES

Last November, on the day Barack Obama won the US Presidential elections, Nokia quietly lay their cards on the table and entered the 'international development' arena. The launch of Nokia Life Tools – initially a suite of education and agriculture-based tools aimed at the Indian market – was a significant step forward for the handset maker, which had for some time been positioning itself not just as a manufacturer, but also as something of a services provider. Early signs of any shift would have come as little surprise to those who know the history of the company. Nokia are masters of re-invention.

So, something else which shouldn't have come as a big surprise was today's news of Nokia's big move into mobile financial services. There's clearly a big market opportunity here, and Nokia have partnered with Obopay to take it on (a company they had already invested around $70 million in earlier this year). According to Nokia:

> Nokia Money has been designed to be as simple and convenient as making a voice call or sending an SMS. It will enable consumers to send money to another person just by using the person's mobile phone number, as well as to pay merchants for goods and services, pay their utility bills, or recharge their prepaid SIM cards (SIM top-up). The services can be accessed 24 hours a day from anywhere, meaning savings in travel costs and time. Nokia is building a wide network of Nokia Money agents, where consumers can deposit money in or withdraw cash from their accounts

Although on the surface the new service may sound a little M-Pesa-esque, there appear to be some crucial differences. Details remain a little sketchy, but Nokia Money appears to be operator-independent, meaning mobile owners on any network can send or receive payments to anyone else on any other network. This would be a direct challenge to many existing models which require users to switch networks, or to be on the same network as the mobile service they're looking to use. In addition, it looks like Nokia Money users can sign-up without needing to swap out their SIM cards, making up-take of the service considerably more efficient logistically. If this thing were to grow, it could grow fast.

We may not know all the details quite yet – Nokia will reveal more at Nokia World next week – but it is safe to say that this could be pretty disruptive. Last year, during the Life Tools launch, I wrote:

> *It's the addition of Nokia Life Tools – agricultural and educational services – which raises eyebrows almost as much as it raises the bar. How will Nokia's move into providing agricultural data and advice to farmers effect, for example, the operations of Trade At Hand, DrumNet, Manobi or TradeNet? Will they be partners in any Africa-wide venture? (Nokia do seem to be developing a habit of going-it-alone – more recently with their release of Nokia Data Gathering – rather than working with established, existing open source tools)*

Already the most active handset manufacturer in the developing world, today's announcement well-and-truly places Nokia at the heart of the international development effort. As if (very) successfully designing and building low-cost handsets for emerging markets wasn't enough, Nokia continue to increase their offering of emerging market-specific services through their low-cost phones. Last year it was agriculture and education. Today it's financial services.

I've never been one for predictions, but this one has certainly come true. Again, writing last November:

> *So, what next? Nokia develop a mobile payments platform and embed the client into all of their emerging market handsets? Imagine, a single company controlling the entire mobile technology value chain would make interesting viewing. It could well be the answer to the age old fragmentation problems suffered by the "social mobile" and ICT4D space, but would this give the Finnish giant Google-esque powers?*

So, should we be getting worried yet? At best, billions of the financially excluded finally get given a chance to enter the financial services market. At worst, M-Pesa's monopoly in Kenya ends up looking like a minor distraction. Nokia really have taken this to a whole new level. Regulators, on your marks…

THE GHOSTS OF COMMUNICATIONS PAST

Standing proud, but with only each other for company, I spotted these on my way home earlier today.

*It got me wondering the last time I used a public post box, or a payphone. Or how many children today have **ever** used one? How times – and "technologies" – change.*
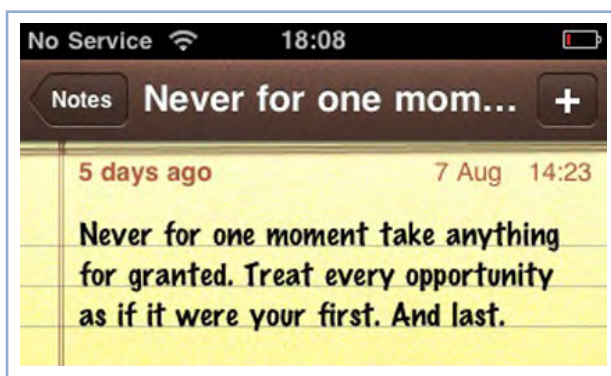
ENABLING THE INSPIRATION GENERATION 🔗

During one of my many epic walks around Palo Alto last week, I stopped and tapped this into my phone:

Let me explain.

When I started out in mobile almost seven years ago, there were very few people working in the space, which meant there were very few people to turn to for support, guidance or advice. In fact, there were so few people with any meaningful experience I was offered my first major piece of mobile work based on my IT knowledge and conservation/development experience alone. Today, there would have been dozens – if not hundreds – of applicants for that job and it's unlikely I'd have stood a chance.

But getting a chance is what it's all about. When kiwanja.net officially came into being towards the end of 2003, it took me almost four years to get any serious traction, let alone funding. Emails went unanswered, requests for charity-rates at conferences were snubbed, begging letters to mobile operators and handset manufacturers were blanked. It may be hard at the top, but it's harder at the bottom. That's why, today, I never forget what it was like when I started out. And that's why I never take anything for granted, and why I never forget to make time to help students, researchers, NGOs, organisations – anyone from all walks of life, in fact – who find themselves working their way off that first rung of the mobile ladder.

Last Friday I attended the UN Youth Assembly in New York. If there's one thing I love – other than having my own name plate, of course – it's talking to a room full of fearless students. I spent the best part of this morning following up on their emails, the fallout of my short talk on kiwanja.net and FrontlineSMS.

If we can help anyone on their journey, then we should. Whether that be giving advice or a positive critique on an idea, helping raise awareness through blog posts, giving tips on fundraising, making introductions to other projects and

people with the same interests, or offering to be a future soundboard as their ideas grow and develop. These are all things I didn't have when I started out, and using them productively now that I do is one of the biggest contributions I believe I can – and should – make to the future growth of our discipline. Our legacy shouldn't be measured in the projects or tools we create, but in the people we serve and inspire.

In the mobile world we talk a lot about project sustainability, but little about human sustainability. If we're to have any chance of ongoing success then we need to attract the brightest young minds to the "mobile for development" field, and then give them all the support they need to keep them there. Empowerment isn't just something we do in a distant land. There's plenty we can be doing on our own doorstep.

It's a different kind of empowerment, but that doesn't make it less valuable. If anything, it's more so.

THE MAKING OF AN SMS ICON 🔗

Running social mobile tools through the global branding machine might not seem like an obvious thing to do, but done right it can lead to some surprising – and unexpected – results. This is our story.

"Branding was the last thing on our minds. It was October 2007 and we were knee-deep building out the alpha version of the revamped FrontlineSMS. I'd just taken a phone call from Wieden+Kennedy (W+K), a global branding giant with the likes of Nokia, Nike and Google on their books. Renny Gleeson – W+K's Creative Director – had stumbled into what we were doing via our Social Mobile Group and wanted to see if they could get involved. I'll never forget the first five words he said to me (they sadly can't be repeated here).

We were still evaluating tenders from a range of web design companies in the Bay Area, but Renny was insistent that the job of building the FrontlineSMS website and brand had their name written all over it. It turns out he was right.

I never expected in my wildest dreams to end up working with some of the most talented brand experts in their field. If we'd gone our own route then our logo would likely have ended up as a picture of a mobile phone with the words "FrontlineSMS" underneath (this accurately describes our first effort, although it did help as a starting point for the W+K team). Early ideas – straight off the bat – looked like this.

It was a fascinating and evolving process, and one which eventually lead to a short list of keywords which we felt best described what lay at the heart of the software. One stood out – one which not only happened to be central to the early FrontlineSMS thinking, but one which came through strongly time after time in email messages from the growing community of users. And that word?

Empowerment.

Beginning to emerge...Empowerment is hugely personal and emotive. It's also something often expressed physically, and how to graphically represent this 'physical expression of empowerment' became a key theme as the logo

continued to evolve. The neat concept of a 'textable logo' was also beginning to emerge, something which was to later prove something of a masterstroke.

According to Kelly Wright, a member of the W+K team:

> *We collectively focused in on the 'textable logo' concept because it spoke to the FrontlineSMS technology, and being purely visual, could be language independent. The challenge then became how to convey 'empowerment' through this pared down form*

The '\o/' form had history, as Renny learned when he first shot the concept through to me on Skype. Check it out for yourself – it's a Skype emoticon shortcut, and when we saw what it generated, we were both sold on the unexpected – but hilarious – additional layer of meaning.

Renny had this to say about the overall design experience:

> *Ken built FrontlineSMS out of love, faith in human potential, and an inspired application of mobile technology. And you can feel it when you talk and work with him. At W+K, while we have the privilege to work day in and day out on some pretty impressive brands, the chance to help craft the visual language and web experience for Ken's creation was uplifting. From our first conversation with Ken, W+K has felt like a part of the extended FrontlineSMS family*

And talking of family, something else very interesting has been happening. Something quite unexpected.

Engage. Entertain. **Connect.**

Today, as the FrontlineSMS software finds its way into more and more pairs of hands – currently 2,452 and counting – users have started sending in pictures of themselves, their teams and their community members replicating the FrontlineSMS logo, just like the ones above. I'm not quite sure what this means, but perhaps it's yet another sign that we've been able to take engagement and ownership to an entirely new level.

A few of the earlier (staged) photos are available on Flickr, including this one by Erik Hersman, below, which has become something of a "poster shot" for the icons phenomenon.

Branding social mobile tools is a relatively new concept – there is no manual, after all. Many people are still learning on their feet – us included – and what has happened here is just one of the many reasons why we, and others, are finding this space so exciting to work in."

FOCUS ON THE USERS, AND ALL ELSE WILL FOLLOW 🔗

If we were to have a mantra on the FrontlineSMS project, it would be this: "Focus on the users, and all else will follow".

From the very beginning we've been unashamedly focused on servicing the needs of our growing NGO user base. Much of the advanced functionality you see in the software today has been requested by users over the course of the last four years, and much of the feature request list we're working through today is based on feedback received since the major MacArthur-funded re-launch last summer. Our focus on the user is beginning to pay off, with well over 500 members actively engaged online. Although we're excited with our progress, we're far from complacent and there's much more we need to, and can, do.

With growing numbers of these users actively engaging online, others have started contributing their own stories on how they're applying the software in their social change work. All that remains now is the creation of the second part of the community puzzle – this time for developers.

With invaluable support from our friends at the Open Society Institute (OSI) and the Free Software Foundation, last autumn we finally solved some lengthy and complex licensing work with the FrontlineSMS code. With a number of educational establishments, NGOs and individual developers keen to begin work, we pushed the code out on SourceForge, posted a community blog entry a little later, and got on with improving functionality and providing continued frontline technical support to the NGO user base.

Although some early partners have already started working with the code, we've been holding back on an official announcement until we have everything in place – IRC, mailing lists, documentation and processes, for example – and the code is in the best possible shape for people to work with.

Earlier last month we started working with Aspiration Tech in San Francisco, who will be responsible for helping build the community. Our own developers, a number of users, and other volunteer programmers are all incredibly excited to be working with Aspiration, who are experts in the field. We'll make an announcement once we're good to go.

Although there is considerable buzz and excitement around mobile technology and source code at the moment, we've been firm believers that the users come first. Without them you have no project, no community. Only now, after increasing numbers of this first community – the users – begin to apply the software in exciting and innovative ways, is everyone ready – developers included – to tackle the second.

WHY DOES THIS PICTURE TROUBLE ME?

I wonder.

Is it because it looks staged? Or because it reinforces our perceptions of the "old" and the "new", the "developed" and the "underdeveloped"? Is it because it likely shows the beginning of the end of a complex relationship going back generations between a people and their culture?

We have so much to learn from traditional, indigenous societies, yet technology and knowledge transfer is almost universally one way – "us" to "them" – and is almost always portrayed in eye-catching images like the one above. In our world this is what progress looks like, neatly caught in the lens of a travelling laptop owner.

The picture tells us that development is on the way.

I wonder…

(Photo: IPC-IG)

BONES FOR MOBILE PHONES 🔗

What on earth are anthropologists doing playing with mobile phones? The answer may be a little more obvious than you think.

Anthropology is an age-old, at times complex discipline, and like many others it suffers from its fair share of in-fighting and disagreement. It's also a discipline shrouded in a certain mystery. Few people seem to know what anthropology really is, or what anthropologists really do, and a general unwillingness to ask simply fuels the mystery further. Few people ever question, for example, what a discipline better (but often incorrectly) 'known' for poking around with dinosaur bones is doing playing with mobile phones and other electronic gadgets.

In today's high tech world, anthropologists are as visible as engineers and software developers. In some projects, they're all that's visible. The public face of anthropology likely sits somewhere close to an Indiana Jones-type character, a dashing figure in khaki dress poking around with ancient relics while they try to unpick ancient puzzles and mysteries, or a bearded old man working with a leather-bound notepad in a dusty, dimly lit inaccessible room at the back of a museum building. If people were to be believed, anthropologists would be studying everything from human remains to dinosaur bones, old pots and pans, ants and roads. Yes, some people even think anthropologists study roads. Is there even such a discipline?

Despite the mystery, in recent years anthropology has witnessed something of a mini renaissance. As our lives become exposed to more and more technology, and companies become more and more interested in how technology affects us and how we interface with it, anthropologists have found themselves in increasing demand. When Genevieve Bell turned her back on academia and started working with Intel in the late 1990's, she was accused of "selling out". Today, anthropologists jump at the chance to help influence future innovation and, for many, working in industry has become the thing to do.

So, if anthropology isn't the study of ants or roads, what is it? Generally described as *the scientific study of the origin, the behaviour, and the physical, social, and cultural development of humans*, anthropology is distinguished from other social sciences – such as sociology – by its emphasis on what's called "cultural relativity", the principle that an individuals' beliefs and activities should be interpreted in terms of their own culture, not that of the anthropologist. Anthropology also offers an in-depth examination of context – the social and physical conditions under which different people live – and a focus on cross-cultural comparison. To you and me, that's comparing one culture to another. In short, where a sociologist might put together a questionnaire to try and understand what people think of an object, an anthropologist would immerse themselves in the subject and try to understand it from 'within'.

Anthropology has a number of sub-fields and, yes, one of those does involve poking round with old bones and relics. But for me, development anthropology has always been the most interesting sub-field because of the role it plays in the third world development arena. As a discipline it was borne out of severe criticism of the general development effort, with anthropologists regularly pointing out the failure of many agencies to analyse the consequences of their projects on a wider, human scale. Sadly, not a huge amount has changed since the 1970's, making development anthropology as relevant today as it has ever been. Many academics – and practitioners, come to that – argue that anthropology should be a key component of the development process. In reality, in some projects it is, and in others it isn't.

It's widely recognised that projects can succeed or fail on the realisation of their relative impacts on target communities, and development anthropology is seen as an increasingly important element in determining these positive and negative impacts. In the ICT sector – particularly within emerging market divisions – it is now not uncommon to find anthropologists working within the corridors of hi-tech companies. Intel, Nokia and Microsoft are three such examples. Just as large development projects can fail if agencies fail to understand their target communities, commercial products can fail if companies fail to understand the very same people. In this case, these people go by a different name – customers.

The explosive growth of mobile ownership in the developing world is largely down to a vibrant recycling market and the arrival of cheap $20 phones, but is also down in part to the efforts of forward-thinking mobile manufacturers.

Anthropologists working for companies such as Nokia spend increasing amounts of time trying to understand what people living at the so-called "bottom of the pyramid" might want from a phone. Mobiles with flashlights are just one example of a product that can emerge from this brand of user-centric design. Others include mobiles with multiple phone books, which allow more than one person to share a single phone, a practice largely unheard of in many developed markets.

My first taste of anthropology came a little by accident, primarily down to Sussex University's policy of students having to select a second degree subject to go with their Development Studies option (this was my key interest back in 1996). Social anthropology was one choice, and one which looked slightly more interesting than geography, Spanish or French (not that there's anything wrong with those subjects). During the course of my degree I formed many key ideas and opinions around central pieces of work on the appropriate technology movement and the practical role of anthropology, particularly in global conservation and development work.

Today, handset giants such as Nokia and Motorola believe that mobile devices will "close the digital divide in a way the PC never could". Industry bodies such as the GSM Association run their own "Bridging the Digital Divide" initiative, and international development agencies pump hundreds of millions dollars into economic, health and educational initiatives based around mobiles and mobile technology.

In order for the mobile phone to reach its full potential we're going to need to understand what people in developing countries need from their mobile devices, and how they can be applied in a way which positively impacts on their lives. Sounds like the perfect job for an anthropologist to me.

TIME TO EAT OUR OWN DOG FOOD? 🔗

Is the future of social mobile an empowered few, or an empowered many? Mobile tools in the hands of the masses presents great opportunity for NGO-led social change, but is that the future we're creating?

In *"The White Man's Burden – Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good"*, William Easterly's frustration at large-scale, top-down, bureaucracy-ridden development projects runs to an impressive 384 pages. While Easterly dedicates most of his book to markets, economics and the mechanics of international development itself, he talks little of information and communication technology (ICT). The index carries no reference to 'computers', 'ICT' or even plain old 'technology'.

But there is an entry for 'cell phones'.

E. F. Schumacher, a fellow economist and the man widely recognized as the father of the appropriate technology movement, spent a little more time in his books studying technology issues. His seminal 1973 book – *"Small is Beautiful – The Study of Economics as if People Mattered"* – reacted to the imposition of alien development concepts on Third World countries, and he warned early of the dangers and difficulties of advocating the same technological practices in entirely different societies and environments. Although his earlier work focused more on agri-technology and large-scale infrastructure projects (dam building was a favorite 'intervention' at the time), his theories could easily have been applied to ICTs – as they were in later years.
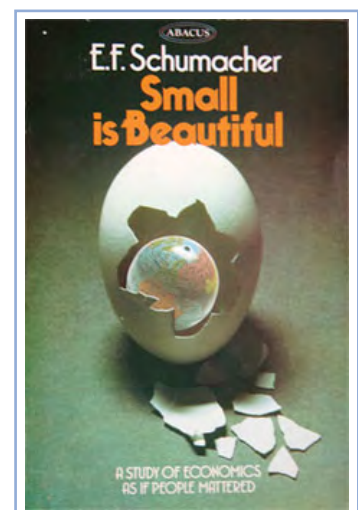
Things have come a long way since 1973. For a start, many of us now have mobile phones, the most rapidly adopted technology in history. In what amounts to little more than the blink of an eye, mobiles have given us a glimpse of their potential to help us solve some of the most pressing problems of our time. With evidence mounting, I have one question: If mobiles truly are as revolutionary and empowering as they appear to be – particularly in the lives of some of the poorest members of society – then do we have a moral duty, in the ICT for Development (ICT4D) community at least, to see that they fulfill that potential?

You see, I'm a little worried. If we draw parallels between the concerns of Easterly and Schumacher and apply them to the application of mobile phones as a tool for social and economic development, there's a danger that the development community may end up repeating the same mistakes of the past. We have a golden opportunity here that we can't afford to miss.

But miss it we may. Since 2003 I've been working exclusively in the mobile space, and I've come to my own conclusions about where we need to be focusing more of our attention if we're to take advantage of the opportunity ahead of us. Don't get me wrong – we do need to be looking at the bigger picture – but there's not room at the top for all of us. I, for one, am more than happy to be working at the bottom. Not only do I find grassroots NGOs particularly lean and efficient (often with the scarcest of funding and resources), but they also tend to get less bogged down with procedure, politics and egos, and are often able to react far more quickly to changing environments than their larger counterparts. Being local, they also tend to have much greater context for their environments, and in activism terms they're more likely to be able to operate under the radar of dictatorial regimes, meaning they can often engage a local and national populace in ways where larger organizations might struggle.

So, waving my grassroots NGO flag, I see a central problem of focus in the mobile applications space. Let me explain. If we take the "Long Tail " concept first talked about by Chris Anderson and apply it to the mobile space, we get something like this. I call it *"Social Mobile's Long Tail"*.

What it demonstrates is that our tendency to aim for sexy, large-scale, top-down, capital- and time-intensive mobile solutions simply results in the creation of tools which only the larger, more resource-rich NGOs are able to adopt and afford. Having worked with grassroots NGOs for over 15 years, I strongly believe that we need to seriously refocus some
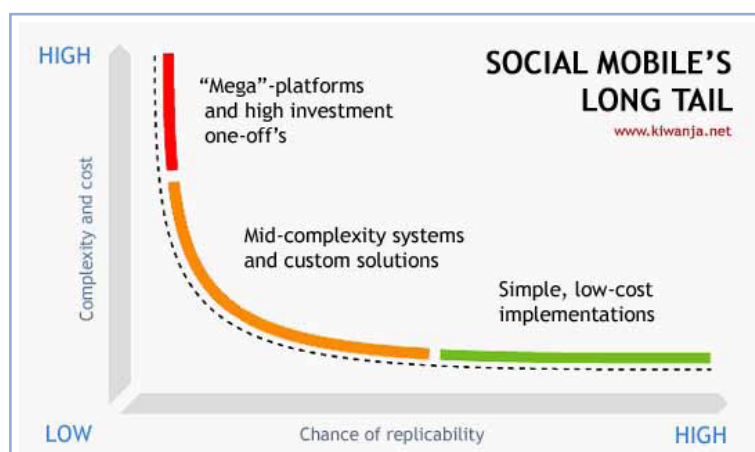
of our attention there to avoid developing our own NGO "digital divide". To do this we need to think about low-end, simple, appropriate mobile technology solutions which are easy to obtain, affordable, require as little technical expertise as possible, and are easy to copy and replicate. This is something I regularly write about, and it's a challenge I'm more than happy to throw down to the developer community.

Another key problem that we have emerges as a symptom of the first. Because larger international development agencies, by their very nature, tend to pre-occupy themselves with the bigger issues, they often inadvertently neglect the simple, easier-to-fix problems (the "low hanging fruit" as some people like to call it). The Millennium Development Goals (MDG's) are good examples of the kinds of targets which are far easier to miss than hit.

In mobile terms, using the technology to enhance basic communications is a classic "low hanging fruit". After all, that's what mobile phones do, and

communication is fundamental to all NGO activities, particularly those working in the kinds of infrastructure-challenged environments often found in the developing world. Despite this, there are few tools available that take advantage of one of the most prolific mobile communication channels available to grassroots NGOs – the text message (or SMS).

Much of my own work with FrontlineSMS has sought to solve this fundamental problem, and in places such as Malawi – where Josh Nesbit, FrontlineSMS, a laptop and one hundred recycled mobile phones has helped revolutionise healthcare delivery to 250,000 rural Malawians – the benefits are loud and clear. In other countries, where activities of international aid organizations may be challenged or restricted by oppressive, dictatorial regimes, grassroots NGOs often manage to maintain operations and often provide the only voice for the people. In Zimbabwe, Kubatana.net have been using FrontlineSMS extensively to engage a population not only starved of jobs, a meaningful currency and a functioning democracy, but also news and information. In Afghanistan, an international NGO is using FrontlineSMS to provide security alerts to their staff and fieldworkers. The software is seen as a crucial tool in helping keep people safe in one of the world's most volatile environments. With a little will, what can be done in Zimbabwe and Afghanistan can be done anywhere where similar oppression exists.

In cases such as these – and there are many more – we need to stop simply talking about "what works" and start to get "what works" into the hands of the NGOs that need it the most. That's a challenge that I'm happy to throw down to the ICT4D community. There's only a certain amount of talking and critiquing we can, and should, do.
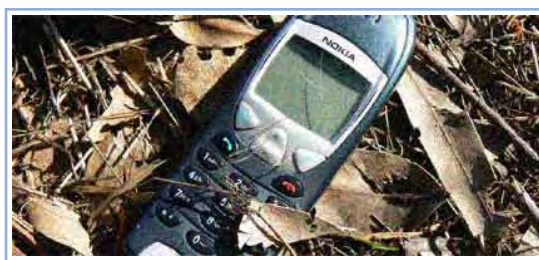
There are, of course, many issues and challenges – some technical, some cultural, others economic and geographical. The good news is that few are insurmountable, and we can remove many of them by simply empowering the very people we're seeking to help. The emergence of home grown developer communities in an increasing number of African countries, for example, presents the greatest opportunity yet to unlock the social change potential of mobile technology. Small-scale, realistic, achievable, replicable, bottom-up development such as that championed by the likes of Easterly and Schumacher may hardly be revolutionary, but what would be is our acknowledgement of the mistakes of the past, and a co-ordinated effort to help us avoid making them all over again.

I spent the best part of my university years critiquing the efforts of those who went before me. Countless others have done the same. Looking to the future, how favourably will the students and academics of tomorrow reflect on our efforts? If the next thirty years aren't to read like the last then we need to re-think our approach, and re-think it now.

SOCIAL MOBILE: MYTHS AND MISCONCEPTIONS 🔗

A couple of weeks ago – in "The long tail revisited" – I briefly touched on the topic of "myths in the social mobile space". It wasn't the major focus of the post, but as is often the case it kicked off a completely separate discussion, one which took place largely off-blog in the Twitterverse and via email.

I've been thinking more about it since, particularly as the social mobile space continues to hot up and people begin to face tools and projects off against one another – sometimes for the right reasons, more often for the wrong.

So, here's my current "Top Ten" myths and misconceptions in this emerging field. Feel free to add, remove, agree, disagree, debate or dismiss. In no particular order…

1. "High-end is better than low-end"

Firstly, one mobile tool should never be *described* as being better than the other – it's all about the context of the user. There is just as much a need for a $1 million server-based, high bandwidth mobile-web solution as there is for a low-cost, SMS-only PC-based tool. Both are valid. Solutions are needed all the way along the "long tail", and users need a healthy applications ecosystem to dip into, whoever and wherever they may be. Generally speaking there is no such thing as a *bad* tool, just an *inappropriate* one.

2. "Don't bother if it doesn't scale"

Just because a particular solution won't ramp-up to run an international mobile campaign, or health care for an entire nation, does not make it irrelevant. Just as a long tail solution might likely never run a high-end project, expensive and technically

complex solutions would likely fail to *downscale* enough to run a small rural communications network. Let's not forget that a small deployment which helps just a dozen people is <u>significant</u> to those dozen people and their families.

3. "Centralised is better than distributed"

Not everything needs to run on a mega-server housed in the capital city, accessed through "the cloud". Okay, storing data and even running applications – remotely – might be wonderful technologically, but it's not so great if you have a patchy internet connection, if one at all. For most users centralised means "remote", distributed "local".

4. "Big is beautiful"

Sadly there's a general tendency to take a small-scale solution that works and then try to make a really big version of it. One large instance of a tool is <u>not</u> necessarily better that hundreds of smaller instances. If a small clinic finds a tool to help deliver health care more effectively to two hundred people, why not simply get the same tool into a thousand clinics? Scaling a tool changes its DNA, sometimes to such an extent that everything that was originally good about it is lost. Instead, *replication* is what's needed.
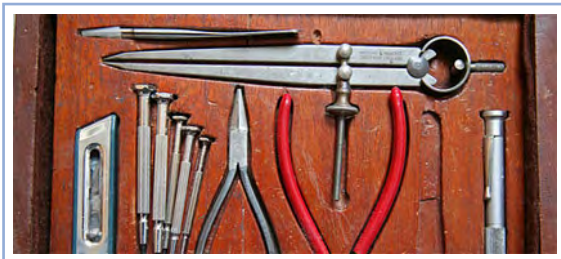
5. "Tools are sold as seen"

I would argue that everything we see in the social mobile applications ecosystem today is "work in progress", and it will likely remain that way for some time. The debate around the pros and cons of different tools needs to be a constructive one – based on a work in progress mentality – and one which positively feeds back into the development cycle.

6. "Collaborate or die"

Although collaboration is a wonderful concept, it doesn't come without its challenges – politics, ego and vested interests among them. There are moves to make the social mobile space more collaborative, but this is easier said than done. 2009 will determine whether or not *true* non-competitive collaboration is possible, and between who. The more meaningful collaborations will be *organic*, based on needs out in the field, not those formed out of convenience.

7. "Appropriate technologies are poor people's technologies"

A criticism often aimed more broadly at the appropriate technology movement, locally-powered, simple low-tech-based responses should not be regarded as second best to their fancier high-tech 'Western' cousins. A cheap, low-spec handset with five days standby time is far more appropriate than an iPhone if you don't live anywhere near a mains outlet.

8. "No news is bad news"

For every headline-grabbing mobile project, there are hundreds – if not thousands – which never make the news. Progress and adoption of tools will be slow and gradual, and project case studies will bubble up to the surface over time. No single person in the mobile space has a handle on everything that's going on out there.
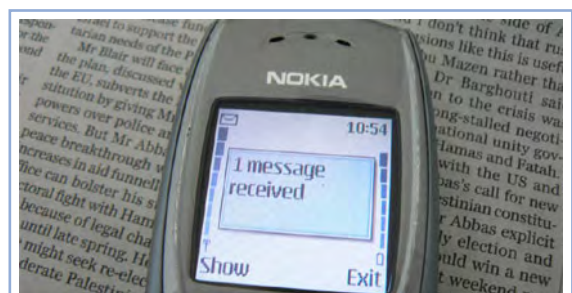
9. "Over-promotion is just hype"

Mobile tools will only be adopted when users get to hear about them, understand them and are given easy access to them. One of the biggest challenges in the social mobile space is outreach and promotion, and we need to take advantage of <u>every</u> opportunity to get news on available solutions – and successful deployments – right down to the grassroots. It is our moral duty to do this, as it is to help with the adoption of those tools which clearly work and improve people's lives.

10. "Competition is healthy"

In a commercial environment – yes – but saving or improving lives should *never* be competitive. If there's one thing that mobile-for-development practitioners can learn from the wider development and ICT4D community, it's this.

WHAT'S THE FREQUENCY, KENNETH?

🔗

This is a diagram for Bushmail, a system which allows users in very remote locations to send email using high-frequency radio signals. No need for a mobile signal, no need for cell towers and no need for any infrastructure.

A wire strung up over a tree is enough to act as a transmitter/receiver, and a car battery and a solar panel enough to power the whole thing. Used quite widely among the conservation community, could this be the ideal **data/email** solution for an 'off-network' African village?

This is a Motorola walkie-talkie. With a range of approximately ten square kilometres, these radios allow two-way voice communication without the need for a mobile signal, no need for cell towers and no need for any additional infrastructure. An ideal **voice** solution for communication *within* and *around* a remote African village?

Bushmail Connection
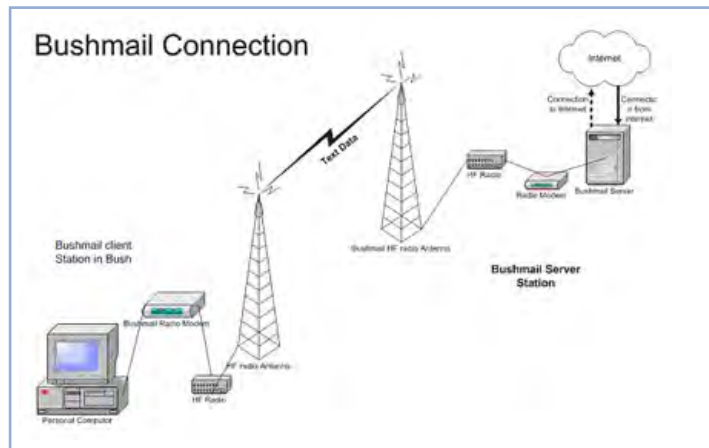
I've been thinking a lot lately about intermediate technology, the 'other' name for appropriate technology but one which, going by my thinking, promises more of a bridge to an "optimum technology solution" rather than one trying to be an out-and-out replacement for it. A stop-gap, in other words. I've also been thinking about how people communicate *within* rural communities. When we talk about connectivity, *who* are we trying to connect people to? In my latest PC World article – "Where walkie-talkies dare" – I ask:

> *Imagine, say, 75% of a rural community's communication needs were local, in other words among itself, and most of that community lived in, say, a 10- or 15-square-kilometre area. You could argue that a for-profit mobile network, likely run by a diesel-powered tower, is an inappropriate and over-the-top technology solution. Other technologies already exist that could do the job, technologies that don't operate on a pay-per-use basis and don't need costly infrastructure to work*

If you want two great examples of these kinds of technologies, just look up.

Despite the spectacular advance of mobile, large swathes of some of the more remote communities in the developing world still remain disconnected – not just from us, but also from each other. While mobile technology is widely regarded by many as the ultimate solution, many communities stand little chance of getting on the radar of the "mobile for development" community until they firstly get on the radar of the mobile operators, and a tower appears somewhere in or near their village. Although exciting things happen when towers appear, I'd argue that waiting years for one to come is probably unnecessary. Turning again to my PC World article:

> *Right now, a traders cooperative in a rural village could easily equip itself with walkie-talkies and exchange information on commodity prices and produce availability, to organise transport and to share storm forecasts. Health care workers covering the village and nearby area could use them to communicate and technically coordinate a health care network. And why not have Village Phone Operators (VPOs) with walkie-talkies rather than mobile phones, who can sell the use of their devices for a small fee, with a near 100% profit margin? Maybe this is a new model Grameen Phone could do something with?*

I'd be fascinated to hear if anyone has carried out research on the *local* communication needs of rural communities. How much of what they need to say is predominantly local? If my 'grab-it-out-of-the-air' figure of 75% is even remotely close – and we put any technology snobbery aside for a moment – then I think there could be very real opportunities to implement some very effective intermediate technology solutions within some of these communities.

So, my questions are these: Are there projects out there implementing these solutions right now? Are they working? What other (better?) options are available? What do the communities think of them? Maybe this is all just a crazy idea? I'd love to hear your thoughts.

EMPOWERMENT: IT'S THE USERS, STUPID! 🔗

"Empowerment
(em-*pou*-er-ment)
The process of transferring decision-making power from influential sectors to poor communities and individuals who have traditionally been excluded."

It's been an interesting last few days. I've just finished giving talks at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), and the ICT4D Group at Royal Holloway. Both may be 'London-based' universities, but they were both totally different audiences. The SOAS crowd were more academically-focussed, whereas the ICT4D audience were more rooted in the practical application of mobile technology, not solely the theory underlying it. I think you can probably guess where I felt most at home.

Saying that, one of the more interesting questions came from someone at SOAS, where I was asked how I defined empowerment in the context of my work, who it was exactly it was being empowered, and who was claiming it. It was an interesting discussion, and something I've touched on in the past. The talk reminded me of my seminar days at Sussex University, where Development Studies students were rewarded for (often severe) critical analysis of thirty-five years of international development failure. Not only were the students wary that they might be hearing about something that may actually be **working**, a couple of staff members joined in for good measure. There's nothing like being challenged, that's for sure.

To remove any doubt about who it is being empowered, and who's claiming the empowerment, I generally put my end-user hat on. Speaking from their perspective makes it generally much harder to argue. I've had enough contact with a growing number of FrontlineSMS users over the past three years to know what it means to them. If FrontlineSMS had helped just <u>one</u> of these NGOs I'd have been happy. The truth is that it's helping many, many more.

If the SOAS crowd were expecting a technical or theoretical answer to their question, they were about to be disappointed. I've always tried to remain user-focussed, and all of my FrontlineSMS blog posts are based on feedback to explain and demonstrate impact. During conference presentations I only briefly introduce the FrontlineSMS 'platform' (essentially a laptop, a phone, a cable and a pile of code). What most people are interested in hearing is the meaningful, practical, tangible kind-of stuff that happens when people start figuring out the kinds of things they can do with it. This is where the rubber meets the road, and this is what formed the basis of my answer.

To me, the empowered includes NGO fieldworkers in Afghanistan who receive daily security messages and alerts. During a recent Taliban attack FrontlineSMS was…

> … essential for us getting the word out quickly. E-mail was down, voice was spotty but SMS still worked. We also had female staff at a school near the incident and were able to tell them to stay put till things quietened down. All my staff made it home safe today

It also includes patients and staff at St. Gabriel's Hospital in Malawi where, in the words of the staff at St. Gabriel's Hospital, FrontlineSMS has *"adopted the new role of coordinating a far-reaching community health network serving 250,000 Malawians"*. And in Aceh, two FrontlineSMS-driven projects – one run by the UNDP – is successfully helping increase income-generating opportunities for smallholder coffee farmers and their families. Many more agriculture-based projects are on the way.

In Iraq, Aswat al-Iraq news agency have implemented FrontlineSMS as an information dissemination tool within a number of locally based news organisations who were struggling to come to terms with local mobile operators. According to the agency:

> *The effectiveness of FrontlineSMS is evident as we can create, manage and update the profiles of the clients' groups we created. We now send messages to at least eight countries using different operators in Europe and the Middle East, with the messages delivered to all the numbers at the same time. We are keen to continue using FrontlineSMS as we predict that the demand for our services, via the software, will grow in the future*

And in Azerbaijan, another local NGO – Digital Development – are using FrontlineSMS to reach out to voters in the forthcoming Presidential elections (the software is being used to encourage youth participation in the electoral process. Not every country has a Barack Obama). According to Digital Development, *"FrontlineSMS has been a game-changer for the 'Civil Society Coalition of Azerbaijani' NGOs and the 'Society of Democratic Reforms in Azerbaijan'. The ability to properly manage our text messaging campaigns has added 100% value to the effectiveness of our work"*. Earlier this year Digital Development pledged to sign up 80,000 voters via SMS to swing 2008 presidential elections through innovative get-out-the-vote activities, including their "Count to 5!" campaign.

Many of these users, of course – NGOs, and the communities they're reaching out to – don't care what underlying technology delivers a message, or the theory underpinning the application of mobile technology in a developing country context. As long as they get a message and as long as it's useful, timely, relevant and actionable, that's all that counts.

And, using FrontlineSMS, that's just the kind of message increasing numbers of NGOs find themselves being able to deliver.

THREE YEARS ON, BUT STILL SOME WAY TO GO… 🔗

I'm writing this from seat 7D at exactly 38,000 feet somewhere between Forssa and Cambridge. Normally seat 7D would be in first- or business-class, but unfortunately for me I'm on a Ryanair (low cost airline) flight. Nothing fancy here. I'm returning from a short combined work and pleasure trip to Finland, where exactly three years ago I was knee-deep writing the first version of FrontlineSMS.

It was 'seat of the pants' stuff back then. I remember giving a very early interview about the software to Charity Times, even though it was only a third complete and it wasn't totally clear what it was or wasn't going to do. If that wasn't enough, I was also asked for a URL so people could go online for more information. "Of course", I said. With no website yet in place, programming was quickly put on hold for an afternoon while one was hastily deployed. In the absence of an obvious graphic to use for the main banner, and no logo to speak of, I took the liberty of taking a photo of the forest outside (the same forest I used to stare into while trying to decipher numerous unfriendly VB.NET error messages). My forest banner – which did resemble something of a 'frontline', I guess – held firm for two-and-a-half years until it was finally replaced when the new website – properly planned and commissioned, I hasten to add – went live in May.

A lot has changed in three years, and we're not just talking website banners. The initial launch, back in late 2005, went largely unnoticed. I remember spending my evenings trying to identify people who might be interested in writing about it, but it was new, was written by somebody nobody had heard of, had no users, nobody knew if it worked (not even me, to be honest) and nobody knew if anyone

would want it. Talk about an uphill struggle. Mike Grenville at 160Characters was the first to see some potential in it, and his post got the ball rolling. A few other sites followed suit, most liking the thinking behind the program more than the program itself. Things slowly began to move, and a few enquiries came in from here and there. One was from Kubatana, who have the great honour of being the first organisation to take a punt on FrontlineSMS (they still use it to this day). Significantly, another email was from the MacArthur Foundation. The huge significance of that mid-November telephone conversation with Jerry wasn't to become apparent for another year-and-a-half or so.

Today, news of the latest version is effortlessly working its way around the web and my Inbox is regularly hit with NGO and press enquiries, people wanting to know if they can help in any way, and a stream of messages of support (there are one or two negative individuals, but luckily they remain well in the minority). There are some great, hugely supportive Blog posts out there, including those by Erik Hersman, Mike Grenville, Sanjana Hattotuwa and Clark Boyd, but also some insightful, short and unusual ones. FrontlineSMS is work in progress, and people seem interested enough to want to come along for the ride.

Cellphone 9 described FrontlineSMS as *"The NGO Twitter",* while Unthinkingly thought it was *"a thoroughly wonderful idea in many ways … If you're into international rural research with mobile phones. A tool worth watching very closely, it's what I think is the leading platform of the mobile research 'industry' if there is such a thing".* Chromosome LK won the Dramatic Headline competition with their *"FrontlineSMS and Sri Lankan Gays"* (referring to its use in Sri Lanka by a gay rights group), while Aydin Design decided that one of the really exciting things about FrontlineSMS was *"the speed of development – with low resources, putting it in the hands of people now – so they can do things to improve their lives – now",* which is exactly what it is trying to do. Isis-Inc – who's strap line is "Technically, it's about sex" (?) – concluded their coverage with *"Yay FrontlineSMS!! Access meets elegance!!".*

It was Clark Boyd, however, who hit the nail right on the head when he wrote:

> **Today, FrontlineSMS announced version 2.0. To get a handle on what goes into this, think about it. This platform has to work on hundreds of different handsets and modems, and in languages ranging from Swahili to Cantonese. And it needs to work with Windows, Mac and Linux. Not child's play, and not something that's been done with millions of dollars of backing from major funders**

Not one to sit on my laurels, I'm already working on ideas for the next version of FrontlineSMS, and a number of exciting related initiatives, with the support of another major US foundation. FrontlineSMS is a major step forward in kiwanja's efforts to build affordable, appropriate technology solutions for the grassroots NGO community.

But we're by no means there yet…

MOBILES IN AFRICA: A TRAVELLERS PERSPECTIVE 🔗

It didn't take us long to find it. After all, mobile phone masts aren't that easy to hide, and Masindi is a tightly-knit, flat little west Ugandan town. After a few short minutes, driving past countless mobile phone dealerships, internet cafes and village phone operators, there it was. I was last in Masindi in 1998, not that long ago in the grand scheme of things, but a lifetime in the short history of the mobile phone. Back then this mast wasn't there, and neither were any of the mobile phone shops, internet cafes and village phone operators. The only phone line out of town – if and when it was working – was courtesy of the local post office. Every couple of weeks we would drive here to collect our post from the Ugandan Wildlife Authority, post our letters, have a cold beer, buy a few 'luxuries' and occasionally attempt to phone home. No text messaging in those days.

Just as I had done ten years earlier, I sat in the Travellers Rest drinking coffee, watching Masindi life go by. Unfinished buildings littered the edge of town, a scene not unlike the last time I was there, except this time endless mobile advertising banners broke the view. In a bold marketing ploy the entire café was branded "Celtel red", yet it was only just managing to compete with the "MTN yellow" across the road. People were busy in their shops, busy carrying goods, busy ferrying passengers on their bikes, and busy on their phones. The mobile revolution is here, there and everywhere for all to see. What has happened in Masindi is happening all over Africa, a continent which now boasts almost 300 million subscribers and a penetration rate fast approaching 30%.

And the beauty is that no-one expected it. Back in 2004 I co-authored one of the earlier reports on the potential of mobile phones in conservation and development work. Focused mainly on Africa and funded by the Vodafone Group Foundation, we wrote it at a time when most people believed that rural Africans on a couple of dollars a day would never be able to afford a phone, let alone the credit to keep it going. Of course, four years ago mobile phones were expensive, but in many places the rampant growth of second hand markets made affordable handsets available for the first time. Nothing is thrown away here. At the same time, getting new phones into the hands of the masses was a key goal of the GSM Association's "Emerging Market Handset Initiative", announced back in 2005, an objective which continues to this day with the handset manufacturers themselves, many of whom are working hard to develop sub-$20 phones for this very unique "bottom of the pyramid" market.

Understanding consumers in emerging markets – many of whom have very different requirements of a phone – has spurned the development of handsets with multiple phone books, phones marketed as torches and even handsets with no screen. If you think that most of the innovation is going on in the West, take a moment to look at what's happening in India and Africa. Even operators are getting in on the act, providing services such as "Call Me", which allows Vodacom subscribers in South Africa to send up to five messages per day, free of charge, requesting a call back from the receiver. Services such as these have emerged in response to consumer behaviour, users who would have previously "flashed" the person they wished to speak to by ringing their phone once and hanging up. "Call Me" formalises the process, helps minimise network traffic through fewer prematurely disconnected calls, and allows operators to add value by differentiating their service from rival operators. A lot of the research, often the catalyst for these new devices and services, is increasingly lead by fellow anthropologists Jonathan Donner at Microsoft Research and Jan Chipchase at Nokia, both of whom spend considerable amounts of their time studying mobile phone use in the field and, in Jan's case, working his way through a fair number of bicycles in the process.

When it comes to mobile innovation, the gap between developed and developing countries is not much of a gap at all. Mobile innovation in the West, largely technology-lead, sits in contrast to that in the developing world where combating the geographic, economic and cultural constraints of users is considered a more sensible way to go. This explains the emergence of the torch phone, for users who live in areas with little or no regular light, or multiple phone books for users who share their phones with family members. On the heavyweight side, a plethora of financial applications have hit the streets, with Safaricom's m-Pesa service getting by far the biggest press to date. Regularly used by hundreds of thousands of Kenyans, you often hear it described as the "Kenyan Debit Card", allowing users to transfer money through their mobile phones to help out family and friends, or to buy and sell goods and services across the airwaves. For the tens of millions of Kenyans without bank accounts, m-Pesa represents both a revolution and a revelation. It is now being rolled out in other countries, with Afghanistan next on the list.

Innovation is not always as official or formalised as this, however. People in developing countries are rarely simple, passive recipients of a technology, and rarely wait for outsiders to provide solutions to their problems. The entrepreneurial spirit is alive and well, evident by the masses of thriving small businesses you find on the street corners of every village, town and city. Last summer, in "A Review of The Postal and Telecommunications Sector: June 2006 to June 2007", the Executive Director of the Uganda Communications Commission presented some quite incredible statistics. Official employment in Uganda's ICT industry – dominated by telecommunications workers – sat at a little over 6,000. Informal, unofficial workers not directly employed, but who were making a living on the back of the industry, was estimated at a whopping 350,000. Amazing as it may be, Uganda is no exception. This is happening all over the African continent.

These 'informal' businesses come in all shapes and sizes, as do the kiosks many of them operate from, manufactured using anything from wood to metal sheeting, or made up of simple tables and plastic chairs. Mobile phone repair shops, often equipped with just a handful of basic (and frighteningly large!) tools, have sprung up to help owners squeeze the maximum life out of their devices, many being used in some of the harshest conditions imaginable. Mobile phones are attached to bikes (two and three wheelers), and even boats, and taken to where the business is. In Uganda these bikes, known locally as boda boda's, are hooked up with spare batteries and desktop mobile devices to create what are affectionately known as "Bodafones". I met the owner of one on Kampala Road last summer, and got talking to him through the universally accepted language of English Premier League football. He also accurately predicted the result of the Liverpool match later that day – I should have got his number.

In *"Mobile Telephony: Leveraging Strengths and Opportunities for Socio-Economic Transformation in Nigeria",* Christiana Charles-Iyoha sheds some fascinating light on the barriers to mobile ownership among Nigerian market traders. Erratic power supply, and difficulty charging, came top with a staggering 87%. Of course, Nigerians are not alone with this problem, and entrepreneurs are coming up with ingenious methods of meeting this crucial consumer need. Today, in some rural areas, users are able to charge their phones from a car battery which is taken to the nearest town, charged up and dragged back. In more urban areas with better mains supply, charging kiosks have sprung up allowing users to recharge their phones while they wait. Soon, with the continuing drop in the cost of solar chargers, many users will be able to do what I did last weekend down my local village green, and charge their phones using the most plentiful renewable energy source available – the sun (yes, we do occasionally get some in England). Interestingly, the total cost of this entire set up came to just over $40 – $22 for the ZTE handset (as being sold by MTN in Uganda), and $20 for the solar panel. Suddenly, with solar, there is light at the end of the charging tunnel.

Any discussion on mobile telephony, developing countries and economic opportunity would not be complete without a mention of Village Phone, Grameen's pioneering work in Bangladesh which has recently taken root in Africa. A number of competing Village Phone schemes have since sprung up, providing business opportunities to mostly women, usually in rural areas, who borrow a small amount of money to purchase a phone. Members of the community, or passers-by, pay a small fee to make a call, or send a text message. Some of these schemes use desktop-style phones, which many owners prefer because of their ruggedness and the fact they are less likely to go walkabout. Culturally, bigger is also generally seen as better, a view somewhat at odds with how we feel about mobile devices in the Western world.

Other schemes use standard mobile phones, such as Nokia's entry-level 1100 (for a while the best selling phone on the planet), while Motorola developed their

own "pay phone" specifically for the job, allowing operators to enter the number of units to be used before handing the phone over to the caller. This helped ensure customers didn't talk for longer than they'd paid for, and negated the earlier practice of operators having to rudely grab phones back with their clients in mid-sentence, or having to smack their hands down on the hang-up button of a desk phone before they'd had the chance to say goodbye.

In many places I've seen handsets used primarily as phone books, torches or even once as a method of keeping track of bad debts, but despite some ingenious offline applications mobiles are not much use as a communications device without a signal. On the whole, operators are doing what they can, but with geographically disbursed populations, often with little disposable income, it's sometimes difficult to make a business case for increasing coverage to an area with a minimal, and scattered, population. But where networks do exist, operators in East Africa are blazing a trial, doing something unheard of in Europe and in many other parts of the world. We're talking roaming, and we're talking "one network".

Celtel, MTN and Vodacom are just three of a growing band of African operators tearing down national boundaries to allow their customers seamless mobility as they travel from country-to-country. Advertising boards are scattered everywhere. "One SIM card. 6 countries" proclaims Celtel. "Travel with your Vodacom SIMcard and enjoy Vodacom tariff in Kenya and Uganda" boasts Vodacom. The speed of change in the mobile industry – more so it seems in developing countries – continues unabated. Again, the telecommunications gap between the so-called developed and developing countries looks a little blurred. Travelling across central Africa with a single SIM, on a single tariff, is a business person's dream.

You may not see a Bodafone on your street anytime soon, but you may see a single European-wide network.

And if you do, just remember where it happened first…

GOING… GOING… GONE

I'm not the kind of person who tends to get easily attached to material things, but this was a little different. Since my second month at Stanford – way back in October 2006 – this particular "material thing" has been my home, kiwanja's North American HQ and my Sunday morning ride to Trader Joes, Peets Coffee and the laundrette. Until today, that is.

I decided soon after arriving in California to get a VW camper, not just because it was going to work out better on my finances but because I felt that living the simple life in the complex Stanford environment would keep me focussed and "real". It became apparent after my first few days here that it would be very easy to get caught up in a place like this, very easy to lose focus and forget why I was here, and I didn't want that to happen to me. I blogged about my thoughts last summer, as my Fellowship came to an end and many of my friends returned to their own particular corners of the globe.

Now, with just two weeks left here at Stanford myself, it was time to move on. The van had to go. I didn't realise it, but last night literally was my last night.

This was the van I retired to late at night after a long day working on my – and the other Fellows – projects. It was the van which kept me warm during one of the coldest winters in California for a century, and the van in which I read numerous Africa and technology books, strategising my future direction. It was the van that brought me NPR radio and an hour of the BBC World Service each evening, and the van in which I lay while I edited and re-edited my proposal for the new FrontlineSMS. It was my home when I got my first ever grant, from the MacArthur Foundation last summer, and pretty-much the only home I have known since moving here.

This old van has been very much a part of my life here as have the people, the places, the coffee and the Fellowship. I had dreams of keeping it, storing it away somewhere and coming back for it some day, or shipping it over to England. But none of this was ever really that sensible, because at the end of the day this van was only really meant to keep me real, right?

Job done, I'd say.

SOCIAL MOBILE AND THE LONG TAIL

🔗

Erik Hersman at White African talked about it. The Economist also recently talked about it. And Tactical Tech are talking about it. Three commentators and a common theme, even if they don't realise it. What am I talking about? Social mobile's long tail, that's what.

There's no disputing that the mobile for good space is hotting up, with near-daily announcements extolling the virtue of mobile phones in promoting social and environmental good the world over. There are more reports than you could throw a mobile at, and conferences on the subject are being held left, right and centre (talking is one thing people seem to be good at). The problem is despite the excitement, in implementation terms at least, we're struggling to scratch the surface, meaning the majority of NGOs, particularly those in developing countries, can all but sit back in awe at the incredible things these little devices are doing. Solutions are tantalisingly close, but without the tools and a practical helping hand most of these NGOs remain passive observers. It's these - the ones who aren't yet able to do anything - that interest me the most. They also happen to be in the majority.
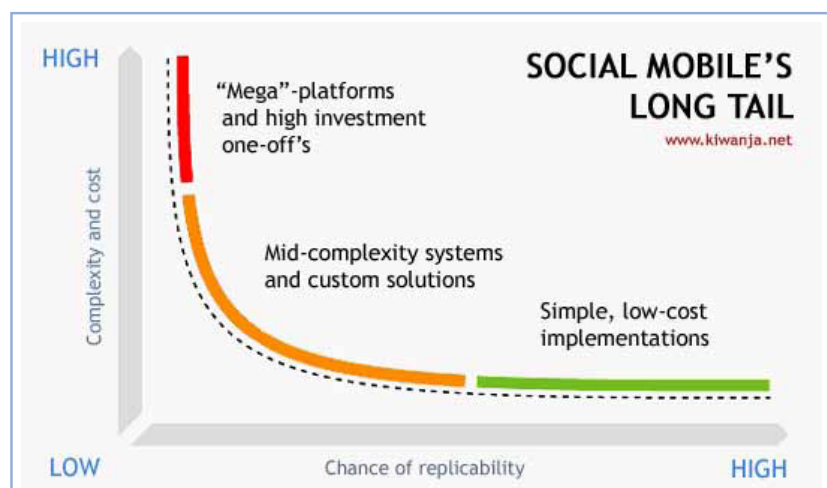
In my graph we have three categories. Firstly, there are high-end high-cost solutions running SMS services across national or international borders, with little chance of replicability for your average grassroots NGO. These are represented by the **red** part of the curve and generally get the highest amount of press exposure. Then we have lower-cost custom solutions, developed by individual (often mid-level) non-profits to solve a particular problem in a particular country or region, or to run a specific campaign. These have a *slightly* better chance of replicability for grassroots NGOs, are represented by the **amber**, and generally get a medium to high level of publicity.

Finally, we're left with the simple, low-tech, appropriate technology solutions with the highest opportunity for rapid, hassle-free replicability among grassroots NGOs, represented in **green** (even better, take out the need to replicate altogether and actually *give* them the tools to do the work, a gap FrontlineSMS is working hard to fill). These projects generally get the lowest level of publicity, if any, since few have an international profile of any kind.

Notoriously hard to communicate with, and with little or no money, it's perhaps no surprise that most of the attention on the long tail is elsewhere.

In order for the mobile revolution to truly become a revolution, we need to be inviting infinitely more non-profits to the party. So much can be done, but so few are active in this space. Going by my thinking, that means we need to be working on the green, because that's where most grassroots NGOs sit, and that's where help is needed the most.

A recent Economist article listed a number of exciting uses of mobile technology among the activist community. What was most striking, however, was what *wasn't* there. Product names. Website addresses. Names. This is no fault of the author – this information rarely 'exists'. During a recent digital activism event in Istanbul, run by the Berkman Centre, this came across as a key topic of discussion. As one delegate put it, "If I want to provide fish prices, and want that Kerala fishing application I've heard about, how do I get it? What is it called? Who developed it?". In a staggeringly high number of use cases reported on the web, no product is mentioned, no website, no place for people to go to find out more. Replication is dead in the water. This is a real problem, and for many NGOs it's the biggest barrier to adoption. Sure, helping people understand what's possible is incredibly important, but only if something can happen next.

These problems are not new. Back in 2003/2004, during fieldwork for a project which was to become t4cd, it was already becoming clear to me that mobile technology had considerable potential for the grassroots NGO community. What was lacking then was a set of tools, and sadly little has changed. One organisation making a concerted effort to tackle the problem though are Tactical Tech, who are in the final stages of releasing a Mobile Advocacy Toolkit, something I've been more than happy to help develop. Finally, NGOs have a place where they can find out what tool is being used to do what, think about how they may apply it in their work, and then go out and use it. Right now it's not perfect, and many of the tools are difficult to set up, configure and use, but that will change. This is a start, and full marks to Tactical Tech for being so proactive.

The central thinking behind FrontlineSMS, developed back in 2005, was to fill a growing need for a plug-and-play texting solution for NGOs, and one which required them to have little or no technical expertise. It was designed to be the 'Swiss army knife' of SMS applications. In other words, as a tool it would allow messages to be sent and received into a central hub, using an attached mobile device, and provide some additional basic functionality. It was never promoted as a single solution to any one particular problem. The message to grassroots NGOs was simply this – "if you've read about mobiles and all the great things they're doing, and you want to do something yourself, then try this. It's free, and it's easy, and other people are managing to do some quite interesting stuff with it".

In the first two years since its release, FrontlineSMS has been used by NGOs

in over forty countries for a wide range of activities including blood donor recruitment and assisting human rights workers, to promoting government accountability, keeping medical students informed about education options, providing security alerts to field workers, election monitoring, the capture and exchange of vegetable (and coffee) price information, the distribution of weather forecasts, the co-ordination of healthcare workers, the organising of political demonstrations, the carrying out of surveys and the reporting and monitoring of disease outbreaks. In 2007 it was used to help citizens monitor the Nigerian elections, reported by the BBC, and more recently in Pakistan it was used by activists to circumvent government reporting restrictions. It is this incredible flexibility which has been the key to its success, and the reason the MacArthur Foundation stepped in to fund the development of the next version, due for release this spring. It's the perfect application for the **green** section of the long tail.

But what about NGOs that don't even have Access to laptop computers, mobile phones, GSM modems or the funds to run a mobile project? FrontlineSMS is of no use to them. In an effort to step back from the problem even further, last October saw the launch of nGOmobile, a competition which awards laptop computers, mobile phones, modems, software and cash to grassroots NGOs who want to use mobile in their work but lack the resources. It is a little unique since it awards prizes based on what NGOs are *going* to do, rather than what they've *done*.

After three months we received entries from over seventy NGOs around the world. It was fascinating to take the pulse of the grassroots community, to hear from *them* how *they* wanted to use mobile. This is very different from traditional surveys which concentrate on what people have *done*. The breakdown of focus areas was also significant. Conservation, which has generally been the slowest discipline to embrace mobile solutions, represented 18% of entries. Only health came slightly higher.

And the winners? Well, we have projects from **Kenya**, **Uganda**, **Mexico** and **Azerbaijan** looking to work with local communities to promote the protection and sustainable use of environmental resources; another planning to launch an SMS-based service for rural communities allowing them to ask a range of water-based questions on topics such as sanitation, hygiene, water harvesting and water technologies; one seeking to help rural Central American and Mexican communities solve problems of deforestation, poverty, malnutrition, unemployment and the marginalisation of women; and another seeking to help grassroots and politically excluded people understand their human and legal rights, and to engage them further in the political process.

Mobile clearly has huge potential as an agent for positive social change. But let's not forget that it doesn't come without its problems. As a community we need to look hard at *what* we're doing, ask *why* we're doing it, and *who* we're doing it for. After all, as the nGOmobile competition seems to prove, social mobile is not about a lack of ideas or a lack of understanding, but a basic lack of tools...

IN SEARCH OF THE SEARCHERS 🔗

In my search for a holiday read last week, I picked up a copy of The White Man's Burden by William Easterly, a book about *"why the West's efforts to aid the Rest have done so much ill and so little good".* Reading this feels like a throw-back to my days at Sussex University where, during the Development Studies portion of my degree, I seemed to spend half my time reading books about how woefully inefficient international development-spending was. On the whole, most of the evidence then seemed to fit that view. So here I am, a decade later, reading much of the same in the form of an updated condemnation, reinforced by a further ten years of (generally-speaking) failure. The White Man's Burden does a good job of unpicking much of what I – and many people – believe is wrong with the development industry (and yes, it is an industry, employing – it seems – as many people here as we're trying to help there). And I find it particularly refreshing because, for once, small-scale efforts are appreciated for what they are, and not condemned as 'irrelevant' or 'unscalable'. The problem, as William Easterly puts it, is that donors and governments like big impact, and this leads many people to only think in terms of "Big Plans". Few Big Plans work. Many more smaller ones do.

Much may be wrong with international development, but the industry is still blessed with talented people who deeply care, and are truly passionate, about their cause. Many work for the Big Planners, while others choose an alternative path. The two approaches could not be more different, and there are many reasons why people choose one over the other – job security, money, opportunity, 'big is beautiful' and status are perhaps just a few. After all, how could billions of dollars funnelled through massive aid projects **not** make a difference? One problem with the Big Plan approach is that no-one ever seems to be accountable. Wait for the next set of global health targets to be missed – better still, the Millennium Development Goals – and see who gets fired. Go it alone, however, and the situation is very different.

Planners prefer big budget big scope big impact plans designed to fix big problems, while Searchers look more closely at specific (smaller) problems and tailor a more appropriate response based on cost, local issues and understanding, need, relevance and opportunity. Microcredit began life this way. It was never meant to fix everything, although going by the number of Microfinance Institutions (MFI's) around today you'd have thought it was. As William Easterly puts it:

> *Microcredit is not a panacea for poverty reduction that some made it out to be after Yunus's discovery. Some disillusionment with microcredit has already come in response to these blown-up expectations. Microcredit didn't solve everything – it just solved one particular problem under one particular set of circumstances – the poor's lack of access to credit except at usorious rates from moneylenders*

Although William Easterley's book only occasionally touches on technology, ICT projects are far from exempt from the Planner/Searcher scenario. Mobile phones are regularly touted as *"the device to close the digital divide",* a magic tool to help lift people out of poverty or a quick-fix solution for activists. As with microfinance, this is also only true in some instances, not all. Mohammad Yunus took a commodity as 'available' as money and improved people's access to it. Mobile phones are now the new currency, and there are myriad examples of how this handy little device is empowering people the world over. But we need to be careful that the mobile doesn't fall foul of the same trap. We need to realise, too, that many of the mobile-based solutions prevalent in the developing world are the result of local initiatives, local people identifying local needs and acting on them. These people had no Big Plan – they simply searched, found and did. As William Easterly puts it, *"poor people have accomplished far more for themselves than the Planners have accomplished for them".*

So often we find that the answers lie with the people themselves, but all-too-often solutions are imposed from the outside – the West – or from above through a distant, centralised government. William Easterly continues: *"The best chance for the poor is for them to be their own Searchers, borrowing ideas and technology from the West when it suits them to do so".*

A few months ago I gave an interview about my work, and FrontlineSMS, to the Corporate Council of Africa for their forthcoming *Africa Journal*. This interview more than any captures kiwanja's work ethic, and ends with a quote which could have easily come from William Easterly's book:

> *… But what excites Banks most about FrontlineSMS is the role he doesn't play. "FrontlineSMS provides the tools necessary for people to create their own projects that make a difference. It empowers innovators and organizers in the developing world to achieve their full potential through their own ingenuity"*

Whether it's measured in the uptake of FrontlineSMS, or interest in my latest nGOmobile initiative, it will be The Searchers in developing countries who ultimately determine whether my efforts succeed or fail. We all need to be accountable to someone. I'm happy to be accountable to them.

WHERE MOTIVES DARE

I once caused a stir during a regular Friday night pub outing in Cambridge when I dared suggest that some people only worked in international conservation because it meant they got to visit cool places and work with exotic animals.

Although some were a little shocked at my suggestion and strongly disagreed (I was, after all, out with a dozen or so conservationists) the very fact that they responded in such a manner proves that I may have just hit a nerve.

There can be little dispute that entire industries are built around the act of 'international conservation and development'. And few are headquartered in developing countries, an irony in itself. I'm not sure if there are any official figures – please get in touch if you know of any – but the international conservation and development communities must be a considerable source of employment in the 'developed' world. Large percentages of allotted funding seem to have the habit of staying in-country and covering items such as head office salaries, rents, vehicles, meetings and other overheads. Why, entire conferences are built around, and funded, on single conservation or development themes. I've even been to a few.

There is much talk of local empowerment, local context and local ownership, but such an approach rarely suits a machine which needs considerable amounts of funding just to keep itself alive. Gerald Durrell, the late pioneering conservationist based in my home island of Jersey, always maintained that his ultimate aim was to secure the future of endangered species and their habits, and then close down his zoo. Job done.

The global conservation and development movement could have learnt a thing or two from this guy.

WALKING THE WALK

"It'll never work…"
"Crazy"
"What a fantastic idea!"
"Masterstroke – we should all do that"
"You'll freeze"
"I wouldn't admit to doing that, if I were you…"

So it was, back in late October 2006, that I moved out of my $750-a-month rented room in Los Altos into a 1983 VW Westfalia Camper Van. Swapping a very comfortable room in a million dollar-plus home for a small van, as winter approached, could have ranked anywhere between *"Crazy"* and *"Masterstroke"*, but it was something I felt I had to do. I never really intended talking about it, but I've been prompted by many friends and a Knight Fellow who decided to write about it for a Brazilian newspaper.

So, as I enter my ninth month in the van (and my final week at Stanford), now seems a good-a-time as any to explain myself. And for someone who's generally not short of words this has been a surprisingly difficult blog entry to write.

The initial catalyst for the move was purely financial, something few of us can ever escape. Each of the Fellows on my Program were required to fund their own living expenses, estimated at somewhere around $20,000 over the nine months. I was never going to let a lack of money stop me from taking up this huge opportunity, but when it became clear in early October that funds might become tight, using my hard-earned cash to acquire an asset (rather than paying off someone else's mortgage) made sense. I could then sell it at the end and live almost rent-free. A search through Craigslist followed by a highly eventful bank holiday weekend drive down to Long Beach, California – the subject of another Blog entry sometime – turned my vision into reality. I handed in notice to my landlord the Sunday morning I left to collect the van, and lead a double-life for three weeks before finally moving out later that month.

The second reason – and part of the third, come to that – are a little less clear-cut, and maybe trickier to explain or understand because of it. For those of you who haven't had the opportunity to visit Silicon Valley or Stanford campus, it is a place of extreme privilege. It's clean, everything works, it's all fantastically resourced, everything seems new, the architecture is stunning, the place is awash with amazingly clever people, and it looks rich. And why shouldn't it? Last year they managed to raise close to a billion dollars and it ranks among one of the top universities in the world. It's a real privilege to be here among only a couple of hundred Visiting Fellows, make no mistake. But when you put it all together it makes for something which doesn't quite seem real to me at all. Just as I've always found it difficult discussing third world development issues in posh five-star hotels and conference rooms, coming to a place like this can easily make you lose focus. I didn't want to. My way of **keeping it real** was to live a more basic, lean existence. It's important to remember why you're in a place like this, what got you here, and who and what it is you're ultimately working to achieve. It's not about how comfortable I can make my life, after all. Rightly or wrongly I struggle with rich pop stars banging on about the immorality of world poverty when they simply head back to hill-top mansions in their chauffeur driven cars when they're done. kiwanja has made many fans over the past year, and I strongly believe this is because of its down-to-earth philosophy. Actions speak louder than words, and people can relate to what I believe in and what I do, *and* how I do it.

At the same time – and this is part of the third and final reason – I also wanted to show that anything is possible if you remain true to your vision, focus, passion and goals. That you don't necessarily need tens of thousands of dollars to make a place like this work for you, or a privileged upbringing, or friends in high places. Why, you can even choose *not* to conform and *still* make it. Doors which seem shut are usually just ajar. A little confident nudge is often all it takes. But first you have to find the door.

I've always maintained that true change in the world will come through the collective action of the masses, driven not by high profile international charities, or film stars, or musicians or politicians but by everyday people themselves. I've blogged about this in the past. People just need to know that things **are** possible. Interviews with the BBC, industry award nominations, invitations to speak at conferences, specialist panel invitations and a major MacArthur grant.

Yes, anything *is* possible.

WAKING UP IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

If you'd have sat me down ten years ago and asked me what my ideal job would be, I'd probably have described something that didn't exist. It would have been a strange mixture of conservation, people, Africa and technology – maybe an extra one or two for luck – all spiced up with a touch of positive change and a dash of stubborn determination. The chances of finding something like that were remote, if not impossible. But there's a saying: *"If you can't predict the future, invent it"*. And, it would seem, I have managed to do just that.

Along the way I've probably taken the term 'multidisciplinary' to a new level, but what do you do when you can't decide, well, what to do? If you're passionate about a number of things it seems unfair to be forced to make a choice, so I didn't. My revised strap line, which came out of an early meeting at Stanford with my old friend, Erik Sundelof, describes quite perfectly what I now do. And it has all the right ingredients – conservation, people, Africa and technology. I was told many-a-time along the way that I should concentrate on one thing, that my message was unclear, but I'm glad I stuck with it.

Eight months have passed since I arrived at Stanford to take up a Fellowship on the Reuters Digital Vision Program. It has been an incredibly positive experience, and interest in my work is at an all-time high. This has come at a time when interest in the interface between people and technology in developing countries – and mobile in particular – is about to hit a steep upward curve. It might sound odd, but I feel like I've suddenly woken up in this strange place.

The place I dreamt of all those years ago…

THOMAS J. WATSON, SR. – RIGHT AFTER ALL? 🔗

Thomas John Watson, Sr. was the President of International Business Machines (IBM) during its years of spectacular growth in the 1920's, 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. It was during this time that he nurtured IBM's innovative management style which, until recently, kept Big Blue at the top of the global IT league (although, with over 350,000 employees worldwide, IBM is still the world's largest information technology employer. It was finally knocked off top spot by Hewlett Packard, based on total revenue, not profits).

It was Thomas Watson's son, Thomas J. Watson, Jr., who finally took IBM into the "modern-day" computer business after taking over the reins in 1956, one month before the death of his father. Previously the company concentrated on the building of tabulating machines and cash registers – products which were to later be replaced by mainframes and personal computers. Thomas Watson Sr. was sceptical of the role of these 'new' machines – still very much in their infancy in his time – and was reported to have famously said that "there is a world market for maybe five computers". There is considerable debate as to whether he did or did not actually say this, but looking at the landscape 64 years on, maybe he had a point.

It goes without saying that there was a much larger market for mainframe and personal computers, but had Mr. Watson said that the world could perhaps be run on five computers, then he might not have looked so out-of-touch. I'm thinking Google here, with it's plans for on-line domination. First search, and more recently on-line tools and applications which many believe will rival and eventually replace Microsoft Office as our main productivity tool. Google has had such an astronomical impact since floating only three years ago, and, as with IBM in its day, it is blazing a trail with its innovative work and management practices.

Imagine the on-line landscape by the end of the decade. Is it really so unbelievable to think that everything we do could be run from five solar powered servers in Mountain View, home of Google? Thomas Watson, Sr. could have been a lot closer to the truth than he ever imagined.

If, of course, he ever said it in the first place…

THE FLIGHT OF HUMAN CAPITAL 🔗

During a recent flight to Zimbabwe I got chatting to a young lady (who happened to be carrying with her – as hand luggage, naturally – a very young child). I was put in the 'big' aisle seats. You know, the ones with no-one in front of you, just that big space before you hit the white screen and those first and business class paying passengers. At first I thought I'd got a bit of a result until I realised she had that six month old baby with her. She was breast feeding and the whole operation – baby included – was expertly hidden. She was obviously a seasoned traveller and well used to the whole exercise. (It turned out that this was her child's third international flight, pretty impressive for someone so young). The thought of all those hours with a screaming child didn't fill me with great joy, I must be honest.

But to be fair the child was very well behaved, and the on-off chat with the mother during the ten hour flight was interesting for a number of reasons. As we slowly got to know more about each other, it was clear that she'd had a fairly privileged upbringing. She was born in Zimbabwe but, as seems to be the norm with many Zimbabweans that I know, she was educated outside the country and had finally settled abroad. As a 'local' I listened intently at the things she had to say about the government, how I shouldn't change my foreign exchange on the black market, where I shouldn't go, how the hotel I was staying in was infamous and had bullet-proof glass around reception, how I shouldn't pay a visit to this 'Portugal Bar' place in Harare, how things had got quite dangerous everywhere. It sounded like I was going to need my fair share of luck if I was to have any chance of getting out alive…

I didn't really get thinking until after I arrived and had been there for a couple of days. Was this really the same country she was talking about?

You know, this lady now lives in the Caribbean and flies 'home' (that's the subject for another blog entry, for sure) once or twice a year. She's met by her family at the airport and is driven to one of the posher parts of Harare. There she stays in a big house, venturing out to the better shopping areas when she feels like it, all well away for what life is really like for a large percentage of the city's population.

She seemed as detached from the reality of Zimbabwean life as I was before I got there.

I've often wondered what it would be like to leave your country of birth, lose touch with its reality, see it crumble and struggle, but just carry on regardless. Sure, while things aren't going quite so well you can understand those lucky people who have an option exercising the one which gets them as far away as possible. But, to me, losing their reality as well as their residency is much more of a worry.

Eventually, when things turn around, how many of these educated, well trained, talented people are going to return to help re-build their country? Will enough of them still feel a spiritual need to return 'home' and help make the land of their birth a better place?

Or will they be so detached that, ultimately they have little to offer the people that had no choice but to stay?

STANDING UP FOR THE SMALL GUY (PART 1) 🔗

Picture this: The writer of a zulu tune written in 1939 dies in poverty 20 years later. His song goes on to become one of the most popular tunes in Africa, and is recognised the world over. Ownership of the copyright ends up in American hands, and finds its way into a film which becomes a worldwide hit. The film makes tens of millions of dollars, and is then turned into a successful stage musical – a few more million in the bank and counting. The song reportedly makes $15 million but the family of the writer get $15,000. As Rolf Harris would say, can you guess what it is yet?

Now, I'm no expert in copyright law, although apparently it should have reverted back to the family of the deceased 25 years after his death, so that would be 1987. Something somewhere seems to have been overlooked, but the family eventually sued and won an 'undisclosed' out-of-court settlement. Another case of the multinational/big corporate beating the small guy with a stick?

Ethics are a wonderful thing, and many people don't argue against them particularly. Unless they get in the way of making a few quid, that is. Ask a hundred people on the street what they think and I bet most would side with the small guy, but they don't have their finger in this particular financial pie. Ask a hundred shareholders – of Disney in this case, if you were wondering – and I suspect you'll get slightly different results. The trouble is that exploitation of this kind is probably taking place all the time, but we never get to hear about it. I bet there are a lot of really pissed-off people out there…

But what happens when one of the stars of a film, or book, or song **can't** speak for itself? I'm thinking wildlife – whales, dolphins, gorillas, lions and all manner of worldly creatures. There's also a very compelling ethical/financial issue here. It's ironic that most of the 'wildlife stars' in these productions happen to either sit on, or uncomfortably near, the 'critically endangered' or 'critically threatened' list. How much of the hundreds of millions (even billions?) of dollars made from films such as The Lion King, King Kong and Free Willy been donated to the conservation of these very species? I'd like to do a little more research on that one.

Musically speaking, Michael Jackson's epic 'Earth Song' from 1996 – "What have we done to the world, Look what we've done" – takes us through almost everyone's top 10 favourite animals ("What about elephants, What about crying whales" and so on) and drives home their destruction and death. Not knowing how much money was made globally by this massive hit, again it would be a very interesting exercise to find out how much was donated to causes trying to save those very elephants and whales. I'll happily stand corrected, but again would be very surprised if it were much, if anything at all.

Wouldn't it be great if there was a **law** which made it compulsory to donate a certain percentage of income (and not just a token amount, either) to the preservation of any species which take a central role in your song, film, photograph or book? After all if lions, gorillas, whales, ants and so on didn't exist then we wouldn't be able to enjoy watching films about them, whether they're turned into rampaging 30 foot monsters with attitude, changed into cartoon figures or kept in their natural form.

Unless something gives the only place future generations will be able to see these magnificent creatures will be in dusty film archives – or at best a zoo – and that would not only be a real shame but an ecological and environmental disaster.

FOR KATIE

In my early years I was something of a poet, taking the opportunity whenever I could find it to put something down. I ended up with quite a collection, and was fortunate, thanks to the encouragement of my English teacher, Mr. King, to win a couple of island-wide competitions in my early teens. Sadly the folder that housed my collection went missing one day at our local club, and I pretty-much stopped writing after that.

That all changed in February 2006 when I heard the devastating news that a wonderful friend, Kate Stokes, died whilst out on a mountain with her boyfriend in Spain. I found the news very hard to process, so much so that I didn't feel ready to go to her funeral. Instead I planted a cherry blossom tree in her memory by the side of the river where I used to walk and canoe, and wrote a poem. This was the first I'd written for about 20 years, and the only one I've written since.

RIP, Katie.

The world lost a lovely person
And us a wonderful friend
This week.

I started to write to you before
But was filled with such sad thoughts
And feelings
And I know you wouldn't have wanted that

I was thinking about how little time we had
But how precious it was
And how I think I'm going to wake up
And see you there

Fate which so wonderfully brought us together
Has so cruelly torn us apart

Suddenly you are everywhere.
A smile in the street
The sound of laughter
The flicker of sunlight through my window
In the words of every song
In every sunset
And living through the wonderful memories
Of this book

You had so much to offer
And I still so much to learn

"Happy Valentines day, hunny!"
The last words you spoke
Planning ahead for when we'd next meet
An afternoon getting drunk and
Playing together in the sun.
San Jose in June
A day teaching me to row
Those country walks
Now never to be

Some nights I come and see you
Stand at the desk
Where you once sat.
Your chair still feels warm.

We never had a special place
So I have nowhere else
To go.

But I will find one
And plant a tree
And that's where I'll come
And see you.

I am so glad
I didn't leave it too late
How I told you that evening
How special you were
What a beautiful person you were
How much you were liked
And loved
By everyone

And you smiled
You always smiled

Me and Marianne have been
Sharing our memories
Of you
And it struck me
How little I knew of your life

But what I didn't know
Didn't matter.
Favourite colour
Favourite animal
Favourite food

We seemed to connect
Much deeper than that
And spend our whole time
Laughing and
Having fun.
Being silly
Talking.
Planning

I so loved the way
We gravitated towards each other.
So unconditional
It's so hard to think
That we will never be together
Again

I'm trying hard
Not to

My Dearest Katie
I'm so sorry
But I'm not quite ready
To say goodbye yet

But I promise I will come and see you
When I am.

Your Friend. x