

“Cometh the hour, cometh the technology”

Ken Banks, IDG News

For NGOs (non-governmental organisations) 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 – 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 boldest attempts in recent times 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 take place far more regularly, often in the form of ‘user generated conferences’. One such gathering – the forthcoming [BarCamp Africa](#) – aims 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 the last three years building and promoting the use of my [FrontlineSMS](#) messaging platform among the grassroots non-profit community. 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 a very reactionary process at a time when I’d much rather be 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 some may argue that those who 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 \$14 million to tens 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 found a solution.

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 regions 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, sometimes it can 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 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. 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, 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 runs today.

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 civilians had helped monitor an election in an African country. 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, its use in Nigeria created significant new interest in the software, led to funding from the [MacArthur Foundation](#) and ended with the release of a new version earlier this summer. The project is now going from strength to strength.

One of the most widely talked-about platforms today 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](#) - which means "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. Putting Ushahidi together is a textbook study in rapid prototyping and collaboration. In the past few months the project has also gone from strength to strength, has been implemented in South Africa to monitor acts of anti-emigrant violence, won the NetSquared Mashup Challenge and was runner-up in the recent Knight-Batten Awards.

The interesting thing about these three projects is that they all proved that they worked – in other words, proved there was a need and developed a track record – before receiving significant funding. Kiva went out and showed that their lending platform worked before major funders stepped in, just as FrontlineSMS did. And Ushahidi put the first version of their crowd sourcing site together in just five days, and have reaped the benefits of having a 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 should rely on an international emergency to raise the profile of their project, and it wouldn't be wise to bet on something ever happening, either. But when it does, the obvious lack of a solution to an emerging 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.

Ken Banks devotes himself to the application of mobile technology for positive social and environmental change in the developing world, and has spent the last 15 years working on projects in Africa. Recently, his research resulted in the development of FrontlineSMS, a field communication system designed to empower grassroots non-profit organisations. Ken graduated from Sussex University with honours in Social Anthropology with Development Studies and currently divides his time between Cambridge (UK) and Stanford University in California on a MacArthur Foundation-funded Fellowship. Further details of Ken's wider work are available on his website at www.kiwanja.net