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INNOVATION AND THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEUR

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Starting small and a willingness to learn are perhaps the most important things for a social entrepreneur

When **Ken Banks** wrote FrontlineSMS, an offline communication software, in 2005, he did it in five weeks “from my kitchen table”. Banks had been working in parts of Africa for over a decade on social projects, including running a primate sanctuary in southern Nigeria. He noticed the increasing prevalence of mobile phone usage in sub-Saharan Africa.

“I noticed that people were only working on really complex and sexy high-cost solutions for the big boys such as Oxfam or the World Bank,” recalls Banks. “All these organisations have the money to pay for these so there was an opportunity to build these solutions for them, and people were going for that.

“FrontlineSMS was built in five weeks. There was no staff, no office, and no overheads. It could have taken 10 years to take off and it wouldn’t have mattered, and that was the first lesson for me: If you build too much infrastructure around your idea too early, the race is on to get things to happen. Therefore, only go for money when you really need money instead of going for it right away.”

Numbers are not everything

Banks shared his experiences running social enterprises at the recent SMU SKBI seminar “*The Impact of Innovation on Social Entrepreneurship*” where he detailed how FrontlineSMS took just two years to gain widespread adoption when a group of Nigerians used it to monitor the general elections in 2007.

“They set up an SMS hub in Lagos, and they advertised a phone number to get Nigerians who voted in the elections to text in their observations,” he says. “10,000 Nigerians texted in their personal observations around the elections. It is believed to be the first time an African NGO have monitored their own elections with mobile technology. The BBC picked up the story and it became big, and donors got interested in what I was doing.”

Banks’ personal experience differs from what he sees in the current trends of social enterprise education which focuses on quantifying a programme’s impact.

“I had no idea about the impact of this particular project. But people felt empowered because they were able to speak, say things, and get news they were not able to get before. I don’t know how you can put a number on that, and I think the social innovation field is obsessed with numbers. If people feel better and they experience hope, how do you put a number on that?”

If one wanted to put a number on such matters, Banks has one: U\$3 trillion. He is referring to the amount of money spent of development aid after World War II, quoting writer Jonathan Foreman who wrote in 2013:

“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.”^[1]

To illustrate his point, Banks described numerous signs by the roads in Zambia that said, “This road is made by U.S.A.” When Banks asked his guide why the roads aren’t built by the Zambian government, he said, “The Americans build all this for us anyway, so why should we bother?”

Money for nothing?

Referring to his book “*The Rise of the Reluctant Innovator*”, Banks recounted triumphs of ordinary people who “saw a problem, it drives them to tears, it gets them in the heart and the head, and they are driven to fix it.” He gave the example of Brij Kothari whose idea of Same Language Subtitling (SLS) has helped improved the literacy of over 200 million people in India.

Banks also mentioned Erik Hersman whose Ushahidi software has become a must-have for crowdsourced news that is mapped. Says Banks: “Erik built Ushahidi over the weekend with no money, no plan, nobody gave him permission. There was only a problem that they were really troubled by, and they just went out and built this map.”

He adds, “I’ve found so many people on my travels who didn’t have any skills or qualifications to do half of the things they actually did. I started questioning where I really needed any qualifications to build a socially sustainable business. Maybe the secret is to just get out into the world and learn about the world, gain empathy, and learn all the rest of skills later.”