



Digital technology means development is now happening outside the system

The spread of the internet and rise of mobile phone ownership means more social entrepreneurs are succeeding outside the traditional development system

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I recently spent an evening at the University of Sussex talking to students interested in a career in the international development and non-profit sectors. That might not sound particularly interesting at first, except that I've never had a job in either.

There's a general assumption - and not an unreasonable one - that if you want a career helping solve some of the bigger challenges facing people and the planet that you reach out and volunteer, intern and work at some of the largest institutions taking on those problems.

But there is another way.

A few decades ago, if you wanted a career in development you'd have to be a teacher, doctor or build dams. The spread of the internet and the march of the mobile phone have changed all that. Now, anyone with a computer and internet connection can build an app in their bedroom that helps to improve the lives of millions of people around the world, or develop an idea which goes viral. And I speak from experience, developing text messaging platform

FrontlineSMS a few years ago with little funding or resources, which now is driving thousands of social change projects in more than 170 countries.

Today, there are probably more people working to make the world a better place than any other time in human history, and only a minority work inside the official development and non-profit systems.

If that wasn't enough, some of these more interesting solutions come about by chance, from people who found themselves near a problem they weren't expecting. Serendipity, perhaps, but as Scott Berkun reminds us in his bestselling book, *The Myths of Innovation*, it's what people do with the chance encounter that matters, not the chance discovery itself.

Brij Kothari took advantage of his chance encounter. One evening in 1996 he was watching Pedro Almodóvar's film, *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*, with friends in New York. The dialogue was in Spanish and the subtitles in English. Out of nowhere an idea popped into his head. As a Spanish-language learner, he wished the subtitles were also in Spanish. Turning his attention to home, he wondered whether India could become literate if Bollywood-made Hindi films and songs were shown with the lyrics subtitled in Hindi.

The idea behind same-language subtitling - or SLS - was born. Today, thanks to Brij Kothari's organisation Planet Read, Indian primary-school children numbering in the hundreds of millions have learned or are learning basic literacy simply by watching their favourite television programmes. Not bad for something conjured up in front of a Saturday-night movie.

There are many more examples like this which have led to the development of mobile data collection tools, crowdsourcing services, solar lighting for maternity wards, or communications platforms for community healthcare workers - ideas which are collectively benefiting hundreds of millions of people. These are numbers that any official development programme would be proud of, yet they've been developed entirely outside the system.

Ask any student at the event at Sussex, and there's unanimous agreement at how difficult and frustrating it can be to get that first step on the international development career ladder. Competition for limited volunteer positions and unpaid internships is immense. Volunteering is often the only way to get the required experience for a fully-paid job, unless, you're able to pay them for the privilege. It took me 10 years before I finally started getting paid. Eager development workers-to-be can't even give their time away, it seems.

If there's a chance that you don't need to be in the system to create positive change, then perhaps it's time we gave more balanced advice. Development does need to be simplified and made more accessible if we're to attract the brightest minds to the discipline and keep them there. Increasing numbers of people are succeeding outside the system, paving the way and showing tomorrow's entrepreneurs that the only qualifications you need to change the world are a little faith, passion and determination.

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