

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

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War and peace

Exploding traditional approaches
to conflict resolution



Fighting evil

From comic books in Kuwait to collective action in Kabul, **Chrisanthi Giotis** reports on the social entrepreneurs waging war on conflict



The year is 2010.

Rahimullah is a rural Afghani villager who seven years ago was living under a goatskin, his village on the border of Iran bombed to rubble.

He is now in Kabul attending a fair on green energy where most of the ideas are touted by social enterprises.

As the chair of his village community development council (CDC), Rahimullah is considering spending (US) \$60,000, which his village has been given by the government of Afghanistan and other countries contributing to the development of Afghanistan. He also has (US) \$6,000 to spend which has come directly from the village treasury – some of the profits from the village's micro-finance scheme which for the past three years has given loans to villagers who want to start their own businesses.

As he enters the grounds of the fair memories come flooding back of a meeting three years previously, held on exactly the same spot.

In November 2007, more than 700 men and women gathered for a loya jirga – a meeting bringing together Afghan religious, tribal and political leaders and others – to discuss the structures of CDCs and to secure a guarantee for ongoing support from the government for the autonomous, democratic and accountable project building that the CDCs could bring about in their villages.

The 700 people who marched into Kabul represented 23,000 villages covering more than eight million people. They asked for changes and got them. One of the most significant demands was for a shift in policy to allow people to squirrel away some of their CDC grants instead of having to spend them all at once, enabling them to save up for entrepreneurial measures that would raise money for the village as a whole.

What, in effect, took place in Afghanistan in November 2007 was that 700 elected community leaders got permission to turn their villages into social enterprises.

As you have probably guessed, Rahimullah is not a real person, but a character created from the experiences of many village CDC leaders. And,



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“Can the Somali small businessman in Tower Hamlets contribute more to Somalia's development than Oxfam?”

– Vaughan Jones

although he is an imagined character, in actual fact, most of the above has already happened. Only the green power fair remains to become a reality – and that is already being planned.

Behind the idea of the fair is Clare Lockhart, a former lawyer for the UN who was in charge of making sure the Bonn process – the recreation of the state of Afghanistan that took place

after the long civil war and subsequent US invasion – worked.

‘A group of us stood in the rubble of Kabul and thought, “How do you put together a government and society?”’ Lockhart says. ‘I spent four years on the ground with a group of people trying to work it out. What we found was that traditional approaches don't work.’

This search for new approaches led Lockhart to discover the power of social enterprise in helping to rebuild communities torn apart by war. And this month she will be one of several speakers to contribute to a key session on conflict resolution at the 2008 Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in Oxford.

Rebuilding Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, Lockhart helped the government to develop the National Solidarity Programme which was launched in 2003 and which created the CDC structure, allowing communities to run their own development projects. These have proved that even in a country where conflict rages, things can get done.

Lockhart describes how the CDCs have helped to empower villagers – an end in itself. But she also found it was a lot cheaper to give money directly to a →

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village to spend than to give it to private contractors or NGOs.

In the case of schools, for example, on average it costs the National Solidarity Programme \$40,000 to build a school through a CDC. A private contractor or an NGO spends an average of \$200,000 or \$300,000 on the same task, incurring many indirect costs, such as translators, drivers and security.

What's worse, says Lockhart, her eyebrows rising in fury and incredulity, is that there are many promises from traditional procurement routes but very little accountability. In one case in Afghanistan a private contractor was paid to build 142 schools and only delivered six.

In an independently produced film documentary entitled *One village at a time* that follows the November 2007 meeting of CDCs, NGO leaders themselves admit how little they got done trying to run projects, and how much more satisfying it was to support CDCs instead.

The 16,000 CDCs across Afghanistan are almost always democratic – a choice, incidentally, that wasn't imposed upon them – and almost always include women in some capacity, a rarity in Afghanistan.

The CDCs have seen this country's ancient entrepreneurial culture revived. 'Afghanis had cheques before we even had banks,' says Lockhart. In many cases entrepreneurialism has re-awoken in the form of poppy planting and weapons trading, but with CDCs it was social entrepreneurship that blossomed. Even before the changes that followed the November 2007 meetings, villagers across the country simply refused to follow the old Soviet model of 'spend', and saved some of their grant money for entrepreneurial pursuits – including the first CDC micro-credit scheme.

The power to heal

Back to the future at the green energy fair, Rahimullah is looking for someone – a man he met at the November 2007 meeting.

The two men are from two different tribes which have a long history of conflict, but the men's common views on the ideal length of tenure of any elected official – a heated topic of debate at the 2007 conference – brought them together. Later they talked about their villages and realised that their two mountainous regions had many similarities. Three years later, perhaps we can hope that Rahimullah is looking

for his friend not just to say a warm hello but to discuss the possible advantages that wind farms could bring to their communities.

While working in Afghanistan, Lockhart began to realise how CDCs were not only contributing to rebuilding the physical infrastructure of the country but also how they were helping to heal rifts between people from different sides of the conflict.

Now, putting on her academic hat, Lockhart is director of the Institute for State Effectiveness (ISE) – a new UK-based think tank born out of Lockhart's experiences in Afghanistan which is looking for innovative solutions to the problems caused by failed states and markets across the world.

She says: 'We always look at what is happening on the ground to develop theories and there seems to be a natural affinity between social enterprise and conflict resolution. This village CDC programme brings people together. Traditional rival groups suddenly discovered that they have similarities.'

And it's not just in Afghanistan that this is happening. Lockhart was recently in the USA and discovered a large group of social entrepreneurs in California who were rallying behind Barack

Obama's campaign to secure the Democratic nomination for the presidential race.

'A lot of what is behind the Obama movement is that people are realising fear mongering is not in the global interest – we do seem to be at a bit of an open moment globally,' says Lockhart.

Building on the work of others, like economist Hernando de Soto who wrote *The mystery of capital*, Lockhart is examining the question 'What kind of legal organisation do the poor need to participate in the global economy?'. She also sees a permanent and indisputable link between poverty and conflict.

'I think there is something culturally and instinctively similar between the social enterprise movement and people who question the culture of difference and we have to look at the way the legal form of an organisation affects society and the economy,' she says.

Comics and conflict resolution

At the Skoll World Forum there will be plenty more evidence of this synergy between social entrepreneurship and conflict resolution.

In another example from the Middle East, a comic book – yes, a comic book – is doing wonders to subvert Samuel Huntington's famous theory that people's cultural and religious identities will be the primary source of conflict in our post-Cold War world.

Dr Naif Al-Mutawa is creator of *The 99* – the first comic book for the Islamic world – which offers Muslim children 99 modern superheroes, based on the

99 key attributes of Allah. This, Al-Mutawa says, helps children to interpret their religion for themselves instead of through the Fatwas (religious decrees) of others.

Al-Mutawa says he didn't know what social enterprise was until he was told he was already a social entrepreneur. The profits from his publishing company help to sustain and develop *The 99*, which has been given a mixed response across the world.

Until this year the comics were banned in Saudi Arabia. And at times Al-Mutawa has felt in danger, for example, when the comic books were launched in Indonesia there was an immediate and heated response from students of an Islamic university.

But Al-Mutawa remains committed to the project. 'I honestly feel like I couldn't be doing anything more worthwhile in my life,' he says, explaining how he is committed to helping to prevent 'extremist interpretations of Islam'.

'It's a fight, but it's a fight that needs to be fought.'

Al-Mutawa is currently in discussions with a theme park operator in the Gulf to create 'The 99 Land' and he is gaining further credibility for *The 99* in the Islamic world. When it became time for Al-Mutawa to refinance he decided to be politically astute. He gained investment from the Unicorn Investment Bank, an Islamic bank with a Sharia board that must approve any investments. 'Now if Islamic clerics have approved me, the hard years are over,' he says.

A toolbox for change

The 99 is the tip of the iceberg. Social entrepreneurs are at the cutting edge of such changes around the world. When the recent troubles in Kenya escalated it was social entrepreneur John Marks from conflict resolution specialists Search for Common Ground who was invited in to the country by local groups to see how its tools, including the creation of cross-cultural radio soaps based on the BBC's *The Archers*, could help.

The shows that it creates both for TV and radio usually meet with huge success. But fighting conflict through cultural products is not a simple case of

transferring the same format from country to country.

'I'm sitting here in Washington DC,' says Marks. 'We're not in the cultural context of the country. We have a toolbox and 50 per cent works when you go from one country to another and you never know which 50 per cent.'

Marks admits that a 50 per cent hit and miss ratio is not the usual figure business people like to work with but 'it's a different world'. In the realm of conflict resolution 'there's more ambiguity than selling coffee or chocolate', he says.

This ambiguity is perhaps exemplified nowhere better than in the world of 'remittances'.

In a beautiful converted church in a side street in east London's Bethnal Green is Praxis – an enterprising NGO that helps refugees.

The practical experience of CEO Vaughan Jones has led him to some surprising conclusions.

Firstly, he points to research that has shown money travelling from migrants in the developed world to relatives in their former home countries – remittances – have more of an impact on development than international aid programmes.

Then he points to Heathrow, the UK's largest airport, and the daily trade of goods happening there in both directions.

'Someone has got to put their head above the parapet and say it: can the Somali small businessman in Tower Hamlets contribute more to Somalia's development than Oxfam?' says Jones.

'If these people who never imagined themselves as social entrepreneurs came to see themselves as that, there are huge possibilities.'

The pros and cons

The positive possibilities of social entrepreneurs in post-conflict zones are, however, matched by the possibility of inadvertently doing harm.

Jones points to the danger of creating new conflicts if 'winners and losers' appear – if, for example, those receiving support from relatives abroad become richer than others whose families remain at home. →



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01 Father Michael Lapsley in Kampala, Uganda, where he worked with victims of conflict and conducted healing memories training

02 John Marks and Susan Collin Marks on location in Israel's Negev Desert during filming of 'The shape of the future', the first TV programme ever to be aired simultaneously on Israeli and Palestinian TV

Lockhart is petrified by the thought of social entrepreneurs from the UK or US traipsing around Afghani villages.

'It's completely culturally inappropriate,' says Lockhart. 'The point is you don't want outsiders coming in and doing what the Afghani could do and want to do themselves. But partnerships come in at the system level. For example, we're looking for partners [from the UK and the US] to provide green technology solutions.'

Another speaker at the Skoll World Forum, Father Michael Lapsley, will also offer a solution for social entrepreneurs to overcome the potential pitfalls of working in conflict zones.

Lapsley is intimately and tragically acquainted with conflict. As a prominent member of South Africa's anti-apartheid movement he was sent a letter bomb to his home in Zimbabwe where he lived in exile and lost both his hands and part of his sight.

Through his experience he realised the importance of acknowledging past wrongs and dealing with the destructive elements of cultural traditions if the cycle of violence was to stop.

Lapsley has formed the Institute for Healing of Memories which works alongside social enterprises operating in post-conflict zones.

'Being a social entrepreneur is being able to see we need multi-faceted approaches,' he says. 'The psychological, the spiritual and the emotional are complementary to the political, social and economic. Dealing with memory is a bigger task than dealing with war. If we don't deal with memory we guarantee the conflicts of the future.'

Lapsley has taken heart from the historic apology delivered earlier this year by the Australian government to the Indigenous people of that country acknowledging the generations of children who were stolen from their parents in an attempt to breed out the black population. The apology was something requested by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike for the past decade as a step towards reconciliation. 'Dealing with memory is something whose time has come in the human family,' Lapsley says.



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Although the potential to help with conflict resolution is only just emerging for social entrepreneurs, figures like Lapsley, Lockhart and Al-Mutawa prove it has great potential. Lapsley for one is positive. 'I think there are real, real signs of hope,' he says. ■

Clare Lockhart, John Marks, Dr Naif Al-Mutawa, Vaughan Jones and Father Michael Lapsley are speaking at the Skoll World Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in Oxford, 26-28 March.

www.skollworldforum.com
www.healingofmemories.co.za
www.effektivestates.org
www.sfcg.org
www.teshkeelcomics.com
www.praxis.org.uk

THE SOCIAL ENTERPRISE SUPERHEROES

If only social entrepreneurs had superpowers, they could change the world with a click of their fingers...

History Hulk

This beefy hero stomps through Afghani villages, zapping the memories of villagers so they recall their country's entrepreneurial history. Villages are rebuilt in days from rubble.

Remittances Rogue

In the shape of a burglar, Remittances Rogue is actually a force for good. In the dead of night he creeps through small businesses run by migrants in the first world and ensures that their account books balance with enough left over to send to their former homes. Their families can now invest in their communities.

The Commoner

In the guise of a successful TV producer, The Commoner takes over the storylines of leading soap operas in countries torn apart by war to help heal rifts through popular culture.

The Doctor

By day he is mild-mannered psychologist, by night he dons his sorcerer's hat and writes magic children's comic books – the characters come to life and teach children how to challenge extremism.

Memory Man

Simple and unassuming Memory Man rushes to areas of conflict gaining the trust of both sides with the good vibes that radiate from his body. Amazingly, he can share his gift and show others how to challenge the power of bad memories.