

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION REVIEW

What's Next
Antipoverty Apps
By Suzie Boss

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BY SUZIE BOSS

HEALTH

Mothers of Invention

► For expectant mothers and newborns in the developing world, the difference between life and death can hinge on the simplest things: battery-powered light for the village midwife, screening for anemia, or a reliable map and transportation to the nearest clinic.

There's no shortage of breakthrough ideas—from low-tech baby warmers to bicycle ambulances—for improving the health of newborns and mothers in under-resourced areas. The challenge is getting good tools and information to the front lines in regions where pregnancy remains a leading cause of death among women of childbearing age. That's where Maternova comes in. This social enterprise based in Providence, R.I., has a vision to accelerate innovation in the field of maternal and neonatal health by harnessing everything from the Web to suitcases.

Founder Meg Wirth has spent 15 years focusing on maternal and neonatal issues from a policy perspective. She also has had on-the-ground experience that opened her eyes to day-to-day challenges. In policy and practice, she has noticed two recurring questions. "First, where are the health facilities? It's amazing how many governments can't answer that question very well," Wirth says. "Second, what are the lifesaving tools and how do we get them?"

Maternova is helping to answer these critical questions with its new online innovation



A community health nurse at a clinic in southwestern Malawi talks to women about birth control.

platform. The website serves as idea marketplace and information channel for disseminating best practices, identifying gaps, and encouraging more innovation. "We're not passively tracking information," Wirth adds. "We play the role of arbiter."

No region has a corner on good ideas. Some solutions are coming from Western universities through graduate schools of engineering, public health, medicine, and business. "We're also seeing novel ideas coming from the developing world where providers have had to improvise or come up with work-arounds," Wirth says. A doctor in Bangladesh, for example, has developed an absorbent mat that shows at a glance how much blood a patient is losing during childbirth. Engineers in India have designed a portable device to screen for anemia without needing to prick a finger.

Maternova currently showcases nearly 100 solutions, "and that's just the tip of the iceberg,"

promises Wirth. To expand its impact, the organization focuses on three strategies. First, it tracks innovation on the Web so that good ideas gain traction, and possibly financial backing, more quickly. "The Internet and technology can amplify voice and speed the transfer of ideas from low-resource areas," Wirth says.

Second, Maternova packs complementary products into kits that can be distributed on the ground—either in bulk by partner organizations or in small numbers by travelers packing them into their suitcases. Obstetrics kits, for example, include 10 inexpensive tools. Midwives who are on the receiving end are providing real-time feedback to improve products and fine-tune the kits.

Third, Maternova maps the location of obstetrics services using Web-based tools that can be updated in real time. One of the first is a widget that allows for instant updating of information about 42 clinics in a region of Mexico, including their location, hours, medical supplies, and specialized services. "This is lightweight technology, very easy to use," Wirth says.

Although Maternova has received start-up support from the SEVEN Fund, the Rockefeller Foundation, and others, the organization intends to sustain itself as a for-profit social enterprise. Revenue sources include a small margin on bulk product sales and fees for licensing the custom mapping software.

Already, Maternova has earned praise from the Buckminster Fuller Challenge. In naming Maternova one of 21 semifinalists for 2011 (from a pool of 162 entries), the judging panel said: "Maternova is a highly innovative, unique project in its field, visionary but powerfully practical. All its initiatives are designed to be flexible: to be able to absorb rapid feedback from the field to constantly redesign and improve what they offer, and to be as elegantly designed, simple-to-use and effective as possible."

Elegance notwithstanding, Maternova does not sugarcoat its message. The landing page shares this stark statistic: "One woman dies every minute in the context of trying to give life." ■

NONPROFIT MANAGEMENT

Thriving on Failure

► It seemed like a smart idea when four nonprofits with a shared focus on climate change came together to build an online platform for grassroots organizing. They had financial resources, passion, technical expertise, and time to devote to the project. Yet despite those advantages, the Climate Network sputtered. Within a year, the project was jettisoned.

End of story? Not exactly. This false start lives on as one of several “good failures” being showcased and analyzed on a new website called Admitting Failure. Launched in January by Engineers Without Borders (EWB) Canada, Admitting Failure is intended “to catalyze a shift in the development sector to be more open to talking about and learning from failure,” explains Ashley Good of EWB. “Failure’s only bad when it’s repeated.”

It’s no coincidence that an engineering organization is behind the site. “Engineers work from a problem-solving approach,” Good says. “It’s iterative—figuring out what works, what doesn’t, and then trying it again.”

On top of that, EWB approaches development work with a healthy dose of humility. “Our attitude is, you need to be open to trying others’ ideas and not think you have it all figured out,” says Good. “Admitting when you’ve done something wrong is part of that.” Since 2008, EWB has been publishing failure reports about its own development projects in Africa “as a tool for us to learn about mistakes on the ground.” The new site is an attempt to broaden that conversation across the development sector.

When development projects don’t go as planned, “admitting failure is only the first step,” says Good. “That doesn’t change anything. But if you learn from what happened and integrate those lessons into your organization, then you’re driving a culture shift.”

Admitting Failure has generated plenty of buzz since the launch. So far, though, others have been slow to contribute their own stories (no whistle-blowing or finger-pointing is allowed). Fear of negative response from donors might be a factor. “It

may feel like a risk to say, we kind of messed up [with your funding],” says Good. “We’ve found that being open and transparent actually builds better relationships with our donors.”

Scott Gilmore, founder of Peace Dividend Trust, was one of the first from outside the engineering field to share his organization’s shortcomings on Admitting Failure. Peace Dividend Trust works to make peace and humanitarian operations more effective, efficient, and equitable. Failure in the aid sector, he says, “is the elephant in the room. The aid industry as a whole has not achieved a fraction of what we hoped it would, especially when you consider the resources. We can’t continue to be secretive about what’s not working.”

Gilmore says his organization tries to learn from missteps, “much like a Silicon Valley startup. We’re constantly trying to improve what we do, adapt, adjust. When a project fails, that’s not necessarily a bad thing—it allows us to cross something off the whiteboard.”

Airing those lessons on a public site feels riskier, Gilmore admits, especially for nonprofits that rely on funders. He was reassured when, right after posting a report critiquing his own management decisions, two donors signaled their approval of his public mea culpa.

A few weeks after Admitting Failure launched, Gilmore heard another prominent voice endorsing the wisdom of failure. Investor and philanthropist Warren Buffett, speaking to the press in Bangalore, India, had this to say about his grown children’s philanthropic efforts: “If everything they do is successful, they’re a failure. It means they’re taking on things that are too easy. They should be taking on things that are tougher.” ■

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY

Antipoverty Apps

► In a rural village in Orissa, the poorest state in India, children often wake up in mud huts with hunger gnawing at their bellies. Until recently, they faced only two choices: Go to school and improve their long-term prospects through education, or



Children at Citta Middle School in Orissa, India, use cell phones to access mPowering’s incentive and rewards program.

skip school and work for a pittance so they can buy a little food. A new organization called mPowering is using technology to deliver a third option: Go to school and earn credits that can be redeemed for food, medicine, and other incentives.

The mPowering model leverages rewards to improve the lives of “the poorest of the poor,” says Kamael Ann Sugrim, co-founder and president of mPowering. “The ultra poor spend 80 percent of their income on food but still fail to meet their daily nutritional needs,” she explains. “That leads to people making short-term decisions because they’re hungry. We want to help them make long-term decisions that will lead them out of poverty.”

Thanks to mPowering, now there’s an app for that. The organization doesn’t provide direct services. Instead, mPowering connects with nonprofit partners such as Citta, which provides education, health care, and other services in high-poverty areas. When Sugrim visits project sites like Orissa or Bhaktapur, Nepal, she finds high concentrations of extreme poverty—as well as cell phone

coverage that rivals what she has back home in Silicon Valley.

Through its partners, mPowering distributes smartphones loaded with mobile apps to monitor desired behaviors, such as kids attending school or expectant mothers accessing prenatal care. Participants can cash in their earned credits for “food, medicine, books, or even extras they’d never be able to afford, like bicycles,” Sugrim says.

To implement the program, mPowering has created new job opportunities for adults who serve as local project liaisons. “They tend to be young leaders who want to help their community,” she explains. They’re also handy with mobile devices, which they use to record attendance or take photos to document positive moments.

With another mPowering app, data collected at the project sites is channeled back to donors in real time. For instance, a

donor might get a Facebook photo showing a sponsored child celebrating perfect school attendance or eating a nutritious lunch. These real-time updates will help keep donors engaged, Sugrim predicts, “especially the 17-year-olds who are on Facebook and Twitter but also are looking for ways they can make a difference. We think this can unlock this interesting group of young donors and hold their attention.”

Sugrim says the idea for mPowering began to take shape after she spent five years in the corporate world, most recently at Salesforce.com. Co-founder Jeff Martin spent a decade at Apple Computer before starting Tribal Brands, which combines entertainment marketing with mobile technology. Their shared goal is to take advantage of ubiquitous technology, “and reach the *bottom*

bottom of the pyramid,” Sugrim says.

One of their first challenges was to develop picture-based mobile applications to get around literacy and translation issues. The picture-based apps run on smartphones, not the simpler cell phones that are more common in the developing world.

MobileActive, which focuses on mobile technologies for social change, has documented the use of phones to promote health care, microfinance, literacy, and other efforts. “Fairly simple apps are accomplishing a lot of interesting things,” says Katrin Verclas, co-founder of MobileActive. But the human dimension typically proves harder than app development. For mobile projects to succeed at the bottom of the pyramid, “you really have to understand your users.”

That’s a message mPowering

is taking to heart. “We’re challenging ourselves to take into consideration the behaviors and needs of the ultra poor,” says Sugrim. “What gets them motivated? What are the barriers they’re facing? The technology is cool,” she says, “but we don’t want to forget the issues they are dealing with every day.” ■

SOCIAL MEDIA

Matchmaking for Philanthropists

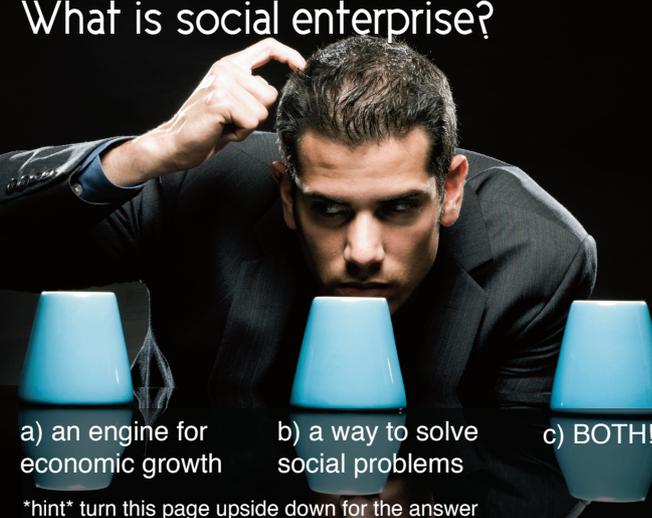
► Foundation Source Access is a new online meeting place designed to introduce nonprofits to funders who cherish their privacy. Think of it as eHarmony for the family philanthropic set.

Family foundations tend to be smaller, younger, but sometimes more flexible than the

grand old names in philanthropy. That can make them a good fit if you have an innovative nonprofit project in search of funding—but only if you can find them. Many private foundations don’t accept unsolicited grant applications and are short on paid staff to field inquiries. “These are the philanthropies you never hear about,” acknowledges Andrew Bangser, president of Foundation Source, which manages nearly 1,000 of the nation’s 80,000 private foundations.

The new platform, launched in early 2011, “expands their universe of potential grantees,” Bangser says. The website is intended to provide funders with access to “critical information they need to make good decisions for allocating resources.”

Designed to incorporate blogs, forums, photos, user ratings, and Facebook and Twitter



What is social enterprise?

a) an engine for economic growth b) a way to solve social problems c) BOTH!

hint turn this page upside down for the answer

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feeds, the site has a familiar feel for anyone who uses social media. That includes most Foundation Source clients, who tend to be first-generation philanthropists. "Many are individuals who made money starting their own business or running a hedge fund. They approach philanthropy the same way they approached their other successes," Bangser says. That includes being tech savvy and accustomed to online networking.

Nonprofits can post an online profile of their organization, including third-party ratings from organizations such as GuideStar or Charity Navigator. They can also list multiple projects, with detailed information about the issue being addressed, anticipated outcome, and budget needed to move forward.

Posting was free to nonprofits when Foundation Source Access

launched, attracting more than 700 organizations to the site within three months. By mid-2011, nonprofits can expect to pay a modest registration fee. For small nonprofits that don't employ professional grant writers, Bangser adds, this can "dramatically reduce fundraising costs." Like the Common Application for college, one proposal reaches the whole pool of potential funders. "Nonprofits that work hard to update their site and keep it relevant will be the ones that donors will notice," predicts Michele Demers Gluck, director of the Foundation Source Access website. We expect to see the cream rising to the top."

For philanthropists who want to learn more about issues, Foundation Source Access also offers content pages and blogs focusing on specific causes, such as education, global water and

sanitation, or response to disasters. Along with a public forum, there's also a private discussion area where foundation folks can talk among themselves in what Bangser describes as "a trusted network." Already, he says, like-minded foundations are starting to pool resources. "When our members meet face to face, they get interested in funding each other's projects. Now, we're seeing that happen online," he says, with typical grants in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 range.

Could online matchmaking change the game for philanthropy? Not necessarily, cautions Henry Berman, CEO of the Association of Small Foundations. Its 3,000 member foundations have assets ranging from \$1 million to \$500 million, but are typically staffed by only one or two people. "Most of our members do research that involves shoe

leather. They're engaged in their communities and learn firsthand about the issues that interest them," says Berman. Although he agrees that technology tools are increasingly useful for foundations, "so far, no one has figured out how to transmit the firmness of a handshake."

Nonetheless, many nonprofit organizations seem eager to try out this new platform. Diane Daley says she "wears many hats" as marketing and volunteer coordinator for Share Your Care Adult Day Services in Albuquerque, N.M. She registered two projects soon after Foundation Source Access went live. So far, her organization hasn't received any nibbles from potential funders. But help could be just a click away: From the page view that only foundation clients can see, every project page features a prominent "make a grant" button. ■

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