



Empowering Refugees: Interview with Kjerstin Erickson of FORGE



by Britt Bravo

Kjerstin Erickson is one of those "shiny" people who lights up a room. After meeting her at the Global Engagement Summer last spring, I knew I wanted to grab her for an interview before she became too famous.

Erickson founded [FORGE](#) (Facilitating Opportunities for Refugee Growth and Empowerment) in 2003 when she was a 20 year-old junior studying public policy at Stanford University.

FORGE serves 60,000 refugees in three different refugee camps in Southern Africa, and is an official operating partner of the [United Nations Refugee Agency \(UNHCR\)](#). Now 26, Erickson is still FORGE's Executive Director. She has been named a Haas Public Service Fellow at Stanford, a Top 10 College Woman by *Glamour Magazine*, and a Person You Should Know by CNN.



FORGE uses a collaborative, rather than top-down model, to serve refugees' needs, and much has been written in the [blogosphere](#) and [media](#) about Erickson's "radical transparency" around the organization's financial challenges.

Saturday, June 20th is [World Refugee Day](#), and this year's theme is "Real People, Real Needs." If you're inspired after listening to the interview on the [Big Vision Podcast](#), or reading the edited transcript below, take a browse through FORGE's gallery of projects created by refugee social entrepreneurs.

Kjerstin Erickson: FORGE is an international nonprofit organization that works with refugee communities in Africa. What we do is essentially support social entrepreneurship within refugee communities. We work with about 60,000 refugees from across the continent. We bring communities together to identify their top problems, needs, and priorities, and solve them internally.

The projects can range from preschools, to libraries and computer training centers, to women empowerment programs. It runs the gamut based on what the needs of the community are, and what they're most passionate about solving at that time.

You use a process that on your website was described as the, "collaborative project planning process."

Yes.

Can you talk about how that works, and what the pros and cons of that process are?

The "collaborative project planning process" is a mouthful. We like to refer to it as a "people-powered" development process. It's really designed to make sure that all solutions are both emerging from the local community and tailored to the community's needs, and are developing the leadership skills of the most promising and emerging leaders at the same time. This process emerged based on working for four years in a more traditional development organization sense, in which we were bringing in international volunteers. We would look at a community and say, "This community needs a library, " or "You don't have enough kids in preschool." Then we would design the projects and implement them top down.

We had a lot of great results there, but we realized that something was missing and that the individuals that were involved on our side were getting so much learning experience and leadership experience by creating these projects, but we weren't designed to create those learning experiences from Americans. We wanted to ultimately empower the refugees as much as we could. We radically transformed the way that we did our business, and designed a process through which the refugees themselves would get all of that experience.

At the same time, we would be creating projects that were more locally tailored and more specific and impactful, and allowed a community and a set of individuals to be able to repeat that process, and learn all of the important skills of how to create community change.

What have been the challenges of using that process? I mean, obviously people haven't been using that other process for so long if it is completely ineffectual.

Right.

Obviously, what's good about it is that you're empowering people. You're hopefully meeting the needs that they have determined. They're walking away with skills. Hopefully the project continues. What's the dark side? What's the challenge of using that process?

Well, it's scary because you have no control. You walk into a community, and you have no idea what they're going to say, and what they're going to need. Sometimes from our perspective we might think, "That's not what you need," or "That's not a good idea," or "That's never going to work," or the community might elect some leaders that we don't think are the best leaders.

You really have to trust the process and go with it, and that takes a lot of restraint. It takes a lot of training on behalf of the project managers that oversee the process.

Ultimately, it takes a willingness to allow some failures to occur, but allow those failures to be educational for a community. I think that is something that we all learn growing up. We have the opportunity to fail. We have the opportunity to make mistakes, and learn from those and recover. It's the same thing in a development context.

What's one of your favorite FORGE success stories?

The model that FORGE takes is really a long-term impact framework. We are focused on preparing individuals to eventually return to their

home countries and to help rebuild, and that's human capacity building. It's one of the hardest things to measure, and it's probably one of the hardest things to do. It does take a long-term framework, in terms of being able to view results. Fortunately, we've been around for about six years now. We can look at some of the people that we most immediately, and most originally started to work with. One of those individuals is Paul Ohisa, and he's a refugee from Sudan.

He was actually on a business trip, on his bike, to Uganda. He was coming back to his village, and he found that his village was in flames. It had been bombed. He just had to drop everything, turn around, and run.

He had no idea where his family went. He ran into Congo. He was there for about a month, and then war in Congo was breaking out. He ended up running for about 1,500 miles all the way to Zambia, arriving with nothing but the clothes on his back, about 90 pounds, and showing up at a refugee camp where he knew nobody.

He was able to get some work digging pit latrines to put himself through one semester of his remaining high school education, and then he ran out of money.

He was the first person that we sponsored to our High School Education Program, and he was able to complete his education. He was the head boy of his school, and then he was one of our first employees leading the largest library in a refugee camp in the world, the Meheba Friendly Library.

He showed so much leadership and promise that we ended up sponsoring him to a university through our FORGE education fund. His

dream was to go back to Sudan, and to contribute and help rebuild. He did his degree in NGO Management, and will be graduating this coming June.

And he's come up with his plan, his social entrepreneurship plan, to bring attention to the refugee plight and also to contribute to rebuilding in Sudan.

His idea is that he wants to recreate, in reverse, the walk that he made from Sudan all the way through Congo and into Zambia. Along the way he will stop in at villages, tell his story, talk about African unity, and talk about the way that wars are so destructive, but in a way that refugees can be powerful forces for change. Eventually, he will get back to his small little village in southern Sudan, present himself as the first university graduate from the entire village, and start to implement some of the skills he gained.

We have told him that unfortunately we don't have the funds to support such a walk, but he is so committed to it that he is already doing his fundraising and trying to find radio stations that will follow him.

It's an empowering and inspirational story about how ultimately an organization doesn't have to create all the changes themselves. They can create the change makers.

They can facilitate that change or create the structures to help that along.

Exactly.

What's the path that brought you to this work? You started very young. It's not something that everyone wakes up to do. "Oh, I think I'm going to go work in refugee camps." What brought you here?

It wasn't something I woke up thinking I was going to do either. Mainly it was luck. I was in high school, I was 17 and my first trip to Africa was to Kenya with my family, just on a picture safari. That's when I think my worldview was originally rocked. I knew I was going to Stanford, and I was on top of the world. And at that time I really believed that if you worked hard enough at something you could achieve it.

It wasn't until I got to Kenya and saw how many kids were just dying to go to school and would do anything that I realized that that's not true all over the world.

There are people who will work as hard as they possibly can, but because of structures, and because of systems that I had access to that they often do not, it just seemed to shake my vision of what's right in the world.

I committed to learning more, and I went to Stanford and started studying Swahili and African studies. The first opportunity that I had to go back was to work in a refugee camp in Botswana.

Completely random. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, but when I arrived on the ground, it became pretty clear quickly that this is what I wanted to dedicate myself to. And from there the rest is a blur, but it ended up in an organization a few years down the line.

Can you talk a little bit about the development of the organization? Why did you decide to create your own organization rather than working for another organization? What are the benefits of that, and the challenges of that?

I'm actually not the typical, at least in the way that we talk about it now, picture of a social entrepreneur because I actually didn't set out to create an organization at first. I was inspired by the possibilities that I saw in the refugee camp environment, and the possibilities for using refugees as agents of peace and change, and training them to be that, but I didn't think that I would be doing that on any kind of organizational level.

I just really wanted to learn more after my first trip, and ended up talking to a lot of other individuals about the situation in camps and how it could be changed and transformed, and ended up inspiring a lot of other individuals to get involved. We just started doing what we could on a university basis, and one day looked around and realized that this was a full-fledged organization.

I was not spending any time on schoolwork anymore. We had people that were depending on us on the ground, and it was time to drop out of school and run the organization full time. I was just finishing my junior year.

Haven't you changed the model some, because it was a fundraising model through students fundraising, and now it's a little bit different? How has that changed?

The first four years, because I was a student at the time, there's no good way to raise hundreds of thousands of dollars when you are 20 years old and have no experience or results besides to get a lot of

people to raise money individually. So, that's what we did. We would bring students. We would train them for about seven months in the States, and then they would go to the ground during the summertime for two to three months and implement projects that they had been planning.

And that worked great, but as I mentioned earlier when talking about the importance of locally derived projects, we were not empowering people to the level that we could, the refugee community itself.

Four years in, that's when we decided to change the model to essentially eliminate our dependable revenue stream, but to do it for the sake of creating maximum impact by turning over the responsibilities of the American volunteers to the refugee community itself.

Losing some, a lot of fundraising in the process, but gaining more than we could ever have imagined in impact and long term change.

So, now people can go on the site and support projects. Is that how it works?

In order to try to replace some of that revenue, we built a state of the art Web 2.0, Web 2.5 website that allows individuals in the western world to connect directly with our projects on the ground. The biggest problem with international development is that people don't know where their money is going. They don't know if it is going to be used the right way, or if it just going to be going into some big organization's coffers.

We wanted to use the power of the Internet to try to connect people to the causes that they were serving, and to bring maximum transparency to the international development world.

Now we have thousands of donors from across the United States, across Europe, and all over the world who are able to select projects and refugee social entrepreneurs that they are the most passionate about and give directly to them through our website.

Last year you got lots of media attention because you blogged on Social Edge about some of the organization's financial struggles. And then just last week, I believe, you wrote about things you suck at, like multi-tasking and managing people who need a lot of structure. Talk about why you have chosen to be so transparent, and how that has helped, or not helped the organization.

Starting an organization at 20, the top job that I held before becoming the Founder and Executive Director was cleaning tanning beds in a tanning salon in Santa Rosa. I had a lot to learn. I knew nothing about people management. I was learning how to effectively manage an organization of 160 employees across five different offices on multiple continents in different time zones with different currencies, and it's a big challenge.

I think that the only way that I got by was to be open and honest with myself about mistakes that I, or the organization, had made along the way and lessons that we had learned; and through that process, cleanse yourself of the guilt of holding it all in.

And to also ensure that the lessons that are learned stay learned and are passed down, that we can be very clear about the things that we have done wrong so that we don't do those things again.

We found that it became an organizational culture in many ways. When we train staff members in project management we focus mostly on things that can go wrong, things that we've done wrong, lessons that we've learned, and it works very well for us because we find that too often in international development you hear about the rosy stuff. But what anyone who has actually been on the ground knows is that it is hard. Things go wrong all the time.

We found that the only way to really be constantly improving and growing is to be open and clear. I am sure that there are people that look at a post on "Things I Suck At" and say, "I'll never donate to an organization whose Executive Director sucks at multi-tasking," or whatever it might be.

But then there are others that get that too, and can see those things in themselves. I think that is ultimately, I guess, our target audience.

What advice do you have for students either who are in college like you were (all the poor young people who have graduated in this crazy world right now), and they have an idea for how they want to create a career, organization or project with social impact? What advice do you have for them?

Don't compromise would be the first one. There was a moment when I was first starting out that I thought, "Perhaps the best way to do this will be to go to grad school, get a hundred degrees, wait until I am 35 and can be respected, and then jump in." Yet, there was something in me that knew that I had found something special by finding something

that I cared about, and a point of intervention that I thought could really work. I think that that is one of the things that, especially my generation, is seeing more and more around them.

We are in a time where unprecedented change is possible. Having the opportunity to be involved in that in any way is very, very special. I'd say if you ever get that spark to say, "Wait a second. I can do something here. I see something different." Don't wait. Just go for it.

You'll learn more along the way than you would ever learn in ten PhD's. You will probably effect more change as well.

How can people who are listening to this show, or read the transcript on the blog, get involved with FORGE? How can they help?

That's the best question! Our website is at forgenow.org. As I mentioned, it is wonderful for connecting people to the exact types of work that they are interested in, and to allow them to support the particular refugee social entrepreneur that they find a connection to.

And is there anything else that you wanted to talk about FORGE's work, or philanthropy, or international development that you didn't get to cover?

Well, I think one of the biggest things that crosses people's minds when they hear "Africa," particularly Africa and refugees, is, "Oh my God. It has been going on my whole life. There are always wars over there. It is never going to end. Why are we going to just throw more money into this sinkhole when the continent is just in disarray?" I get that. I think that I had a lot of those reactions early on, like, is this ever going to be solved, or are these problems intractable? But after

spending the years on the ground that I have, I'm absolutely convinced that the problems that Africa faces are 100% overcomable with investment; investment in root causes rather than symptoms.

The first time I went to Africa I was 17. I love shoes and I had 30 pairs of shoes at home. I was shocked when I saw that kids weren't wearing shoes, and that they were walking to school. It was appalling.

My first reaction was, "Well, they need shoes. I am going to send it to them." I was able to collect 2,000 shoes, and everyone told me I was such a good person. I sent them over.

It wasn't until a few years later when I learned more about development and how important it is to carefully consider interventions that I realized that that was probably doing more harm than good.

Who knows what happens when kids who haven't worn shoes are suddenly wearing them. Then their feet get tender again, and what happens when they grow out of them? Are they going to have to spend more of their money on shoes?

There are all kinds of issues there and what root problem was actually being solved? That is the question that I think the international community needs to look at more, because if we invested the same amount in root causes, like human capacity, education, and economic systems, that we do in the symptoms of no shoes, no shirt, needing balls to play with, or whatever it might be, I think the issues that Africa faces can be solved within our lifetimes.

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