

Pitch perfect: big problems, clear solutions

by Karen Downing

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Give an aid and development practitioner three minutes and they'll be able to tell you in detail about something that is wrong in the sector. 3MAP: the three-minute aid pitch – a conference favourite at the [2022 Australasian AID Conference](#) in November – asked them to come up with the solution as well.

In an [energetic, laughter-filled session](#), seven presenters raced against the clock to sell their big idea to an enthusiastic audience which then voted for a winner.

The development sector hasn't made the best job of making development work intelligible and attractive to adult tax-payers, much less to kids, said Melody Zavala from The Asia Foundation. She wants to use the power of stories to inspire children "to become the global citizens, aid practitioners and policymakers that we need". The UN-initiated children's picture book [My Hero Is You](#) is a case study in what can be achieved. It uses a fantasy creature travelling the world to help children handle COVID-19 with information and coping strategies. [Translated into 140 languages](#), and adapted to video, animation and puppetry, the story has influenced millions of people.

So, said Melody, let's inspire children with stories that convey the development sector's core concepts of shared community, equal opportunity and self-determination. Let's produce stories of children solving problems in local contexts – stories where children are development heroes.

The flip side of telling stories is listening. And listening, said Lautoa Faletau from Deloitte Australia, is the art that development practitioners need to learn if they want to meaningfully engage in the Pacific. Listening needs to begin in the design phase, with the people who are going to be most affected by a program sitting at the table when it is planned. "Localisation" is increasingly seen as best practice – Lautoa would rather call it "locally-led and owned".

Imagine, said consultant Neal Forster, a hospital where nobody knows if any of the patients are getting any better. There's lots of reporting on the hospital budget and

buildings, the salaries of medical staff and administrators, and even the quality of the cafeteria food – but nothing on the patients. Everyone associated with the hospital (except the patients) regularly talks about how the hospital is going and plans for the future. Nobody agrees on anything much except that the hospital needs more money. Sounds like the aid program, right?

Aid program reports cover budgets, training and widgets but not the actual benefits to the people, communities and institutions that aid programs are meant to support, Neal said. He wants development practitioners to report on change from the beginning of, and continuously throughout, programs, whether it is in the official guidelines or not.

Programs can't be run without resources, and currently there is a shortfall of nearly A\$3 trillion in the money needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals goals by 2030. Where is the necessary investment to come from? "Impact investment", said Clay O'Brien from the Australian International Development Network and Brightlight. It may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it is possible to achieve development outcomes (both environmental and economic) while generating financial returns.

Furthermore, said Clay, demand from investors is strong. He is proposing an "exciting initiative", an NGO master trust fund: "a unitised wholesale fund structure designed to shift capital from international development donors to SDG impact in emerging markets alongside the Australian NGO community".

Partnering, however, is hard. Organisations are made up of people and relationships are messy. Don't worry, said Bianca Gay from Catalpa International, help can be found in couples therapy. She has three recommendations for being "a good partner". First, be vulnerable enough to let your partner pleasantly surprise you (leave your stereotypes and expectations aside). Second, make requests for what you need from your partner without assigning blame (she has a "tried and tested way to not put your partner on the defence"). And, third, it takes two to tango but only one to break a negative cycle of behaviour, so invite your partner to be on the same side, fighting these cycles together and fighting inequality together – which is, after all, said Bianca, the whole point of the partnership.

Something else that will make the work easier, said Ashlee Betteridge from Better Things Consulting, is "the life changing magic of filing stuff". She points out how little DFAT knowledge is retained and accessible by "external folk", such as evaluations, case studies, reports, communication assets, data and analysis, reviews, old design and program strategies, and historical performance information.

“We talk about need for long-term funding and long-term programming,” said Ashlee, “but what about need for long-term knowledge management?” Fix the DFAT website, resource it, make it functional, she said, and we can all stop reinventing the wheel.

And while we are at that, said Raphaël Merx from Catalpa International, we should get rid of aid jargon. Jargon is everywhere in the aid sector (think “capacity building” and “multi-stakeholder collaboration”) – if you use it you seem to know what you are talking about. But when you are an engineer, like Raphaël, you see repetition and automatically think “automation”. He taught an AI to write in the style of DFAT. It’s online and called “[Talk DFAT to me](#)” – it does a “pretty good job”. But it’s awful, said Raphaël, because reports shouldn’t be written like that in the first place.

Jargon conveys a veneer of knowledge that says very little, is unintelligible to non-native English speakers who are the vast majority of people we are dealing with, and favours a privileged class of people, the “aid veterans”, Raphaël explained. Less of it, therefore, means more transparency, accessibility and equity. “Protect our jobs from AIs”, said Raphaël. “Support locally led programming. Minimise jargon.”

Inspire children to be change-makers, listen to the people in the communities in which you are working, report on actual change by asking the people you are working with, think outside the box on funding, be a better partner, get your filing in order, and drop the jargon – big ideas and simple solutions to some of the ongoing issues in the aid and development sector.

Congratulations to third runner-up Bianca Gay, second runner-up (and previous winner) Ashlee Betteridge, and winner Raphaël Merx. Thank you to the [Development Intelligence Lab](#) for their support of 3MAP. [Watch the livestreamed recording](#) of the presentations.

Note: This blog was amended on 13/2/23 to correct the amount of the shortfall of money needed to reach the Sustainable Development Goals goals by 2030, from A\$3 billion to A\$3 trillion.

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