

Simon exemplar

Ian Allsop finds out about Simon Maddrell's future goals for award winning charity Excellent Development.

Simon Maddrell, co-founder and chief executive of Excellent Development, says that his career has eventually turned out as he wanted it to. "It was the gap in the middle that was the problem."

Excellent Development was overall winner at the 2008 Charity Awards for its incredibly successful work on encouraging communities in Kenya to utilise sand dam technology to access water. Maddrell first became aware of the possibilities of this when he met Joshua Mukusya in 1984 as an eager venture scout who had decided to go and work in Kenya. "I had a friend who had dug wells in India and my Dad had taught in Africa, so there were always books around."

He then had offers to study at medical school, but ended up doing peace studies at Bradford, focusing on development and environmental economics. His dissertation was on Mukusya's community and this gave

him an in-depth insight into the model and the difference sand dams can make.

However, having completed his degree he couldn't get a job in development. He was advised by the HR director of Save the Children to get a job in industry for a couple of years, but then he found charities wouldn't employ him despite his experience in Kenya.

Maddrell joined Xerox and worked through the ranks from purchasing to running document services for BT. "I gained lots of management skills, strategic development, managing people etc – it was fantastic experience and a great career but I always knew in my heart of hearts that it was not what I wanted to do forever."

"At Xerox I was used as a change agent, which I was not comfortable with. When I got the chance to take voluntary redundancy I grabbed it and ran." However, he was

unsuccessful looking for work in NGO sector, applying for 100 jobs, getting two interviews and no job.

He identifies a strong affiliation with Mukusya's thinking and brand of development. "Nothing comes for free, you need to work on the priorities that communities identify themselves, not what has been identified for them." He says he had a passion and belief in what Mukusya had done. He fulfilled a promise he had made to Mukusya to trial and pilot the addition of tree planting to the terracing and sand dam model.

"Work with the pilot seemed to be going well and it occurred to me whether I really wanted to get a job with Oxfam. I had proved I was more comfortable with an entrepreneurial environment and thought if you can't join 'em, then beat 'em." And so Excellent Development was founded in 2002.

Maddrell is very clear about the charity's ethos. "We don't push money anywhere, and only work with communities who ask for help. We are not programme driven but reactive. The fundamental start point is that people want to work themselves."

Now, nearly seven years on, what the charity has achieved is phenomenal. It has defined targets that by 2010 it will have dug 300 dams, established 1,000 kilometres of terracing and planted one million trees, all of which it is in line to meet or exceed.

He admits that although he had many goals and ambitions, he never dreamed it would win the Charity Awards. "I didn't think in a month of Sundays that would happen."

However, as in his acceptance speech last June, Maddrell is quick to praise the work of the farmers in Kenya. "We had a massive event in Kenya where every group was given a rejigged awards certificate, as were the staff. The district commissioner



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gave a speech. It was a proud moment for all the farmers to get recognition for their hard work. We gained a lot of local publicity in Kenya. From a motivational point of view for staff and communities it was great. You need to see the face of a farmer and see how proud he was to see what it meant – a hell of a lot. It is an injection of adrenalin and of energy and affirmation that what you are doing has value."

Since the Charity Awards the charity has invested in fundraising and Maddrell gives credit to the trustees for taking that step. His future goal is that by 2020, 2,000 sand dams a year will be built, but it won't necessarily be Excellent Development which is building them. "If an organisation grows too much it becomes different. I don't want to lose something beautiful for the sake of growing."

Therefore he is talking to other charities to see if the principles of the technology and the approach can be used elsewhere. "What we do in Kenya can become a role model for supporting farmers in other areas. But it is not about

straight replication. We are focusing on looking at if we can move into more countries either under our own name or through close partnership with a local NGO. But we will need to understand the local culture, geography and legal system. For example in Ethiopia the government owns every tree so how do you do tree planting programmes?"

"Lots of products fail because they are before their time"

He continues: "We can advocate the principles of sand dam conservation primarily though supporting on a small scale other organisations to build sand dams. But it is not about franchising. We need to understand the difference between replication and application. Our solution is not appropriate to all, and the principle of sustainable development needs to be relevant to people themselves. In some ways it would be a lot easier to raise the money to build the sand dams

ourselves but it's not the right way of doing it. It will be more successful if we engage with the people in communities rather than pretending we know better."

Maddrell is also very interested in thinking on how innovations take off. "What are the factors that turn something that is low use to something that experiences exponential growth? Lots of products fail because they are before their time."

He mentions fax machines, which Xerox invented 20 years before they really took off. A key barrier to their use was that their success relied on the intended recipient having a machine, but something must have happened for them to suddenly be in such wide use. "Unless it meets a need and priority of those who use it, it won't work no matter how good the technology."

Maddrell points out that sand dams have been around since 4BC, but says there must be some reason why they haven't taken off, and understanding that will be key to how far Excellent Development can achieve its future ambitions. ■

