

Development People

Nik Hartley, Chief Executive at Restless Development, talks about what it means to be a youth-led organisation and shares his views on critical sector issues.

“Young people can lead development all the way up to governance - level.”



• Drama interns raising awareness of sexual health issues on Sierra Leone's streets
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You have been at Restless Development since 1998. What continues to inspire you to work with young people?

It is tempting to talk about young people's passion and energy and all those usual caricatures but my inspiration comes from young people's ability to step up and be as professional and accountable as any other professional in the sector and to perform at the highest level. I am driven when I see that our monitoring and evaluation systems have been accepted by a major donor and the whole thing was developed by three 24 year-olds, or when one of our young people presents something that is highly technical at a World Bank meeting, and of course by the programmes young people deliver on the ground.

What has been your priority since taking over as Chief Executive?

I have been thinking about priorities beyond our strategy and objectives. I believe Restless Development can become (and is becoming) the go-to agency on youth and specifically youth-led development but this means that we need to be an expert that others can properly utilise and tap into. Alongside this I want us to retain our really unique values and culture. Like so many NGOs, Restless Development is very professional, accountable, expert and focused on our goals but it is also notably an exciting, radical, edgy, fun and innovative place to work – and these are part of our core values. To keep both of these contrasting elements alive is my biggest ambition.

How has the recent rebranding of Restless Development impacted on the organisation and its position in the sector?

It has been transformative. We knew internally that we had become 'the youth-led development agency' focusing on the role young people can play in all aspects of development but our external story, brand and image had fallen 10 years behind. I am convinced that we can make a huge contribution to the development sector and to get this story right needs a strong 'brand' that helps others to understand who we are, what we do and our impact and how we can help them to work with young people. Figtree were simply unbelievable in what they did to support us in developing Restless Development.

Did you live 'Below the Line'?

I did, and will be again this year. I would love other people to think about living below the line – a challenge to eat and drink on less than £1 a day for five days – because aside from the money it raises, it is also a moment that serves as a tiny reminder to us all, of the poverty that we are working with and for every day. It doesn't translate it or give the experience of poverty but it is something that for just a week is tangible.

How does having young people on the Board influence the direction of the organisation?

I think firstly it demonstrates to everyone that young people can lead development all the way up to governance-level, and is also a powerful message to all the young people that we work with every day. Many NGOs work with young people and one of the skills that young people can bring is their perspective so why wouldn't they want to have a young person on the board to bring that massive part of society to the table? Cultural norms mean we often don't include young people as leaders and we at Restless understand that it's not easy. But Restless Development is here to help and offer practical support on how to include young people at the highest level.

How will value for money help the organisation become more effective?

We see value for money less as a requirement that organisations should feel nervous about and more as a fundamental tool by which we can achieve our strategy. What we found is that as soon as we started translating value for money into 'real-speak' it lost the stigma of being something that has been imposed on us. Splitting our work

into 'economy', 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' helps to break down all the elements of a programme and makes it easier to pinpoint how we can make it the best value for money possible. Split like this, we realise how much we are already doing: measuring and controlling effectiveness (through monitoring and evaluation), and economy (through procurement and other finance systems) and even efficiency (modelling outputs against inputs). Value for money is about joining the lines between these. We are very happy to share and learn with other organisations as we develop this.

How is Restless Development involved with the post-MDGs agenda?

We are very keen to bring the youth element to the beyond-2015 campaign whether that be disaggregating what the impact has been on young people or where young people can be involved. We want to bring a youth lens to the discussion. Linking with Bond is essential because together we have a much bigger voice than any one of us can have individually. On the other hand, while of course thinking beyond 2015 is crucial, we must also make sure that the sector remains focused on the Millennium Development Goals and meeting more of the indicators and targets.

Where would you like Restless Development to be in five years time?

I hope that we will be a leader in youth-led and youth-focused development, but this won't be worth anything if we have not benefitted the sector around us. We need to be a leader in a field that is important to the development community, the private sector and government. If we're not truly expert or

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useful to others then that is of no benefit to the sector and youth won't become an important area. We are trying to prove that young people are an asset and so we need to not only help them to achieve this but also help other organisations tap into that asset.

What is the key challenge for the sector in 2012–13 (and beyond)?

I think that we are entering a 'post-European/American aid-led world'. Until recently, Europe (and the USA) was a power house when it came to global development decisions but that is changing. Economic decline here and the rapid growth of South and East Asia, parts of South America and Africa means that more development expertise, capacity and money are coming from other places. At the same time in Europe (and the UK specifically) the public perception of aid is increasingly negative. This combination means that our challenge, which I see as positive, is that we need to reinvent what we are talking about, how we do things and how we describe what we do.

And not just how we set out our narrative but how we do it. In our structure for instance the options can move to more radical models beyond concepts of national and international; in-country offices with national, regional and globally focused staff. I look at our immense (young) capacity in-country and am aware of what an asset they all are to global development not just to an NGO on the ground. This kind of thinking can change our business model altogether. We don't need to be working in silos anymore – we need greater cross-fertilisation and sharing both internally and across the sector.



• Young people in an interactive workshop in Nepal on HIV/AIDS, discussing how they can help in the fight against the disease © Restless Development

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For more information about Below the Line:
www.restlessdevelopment.org/livebelowtheline

