

THE YPN INTERVIEW

Name: ANDREW HUNT

Place of work: WEST AFRICA
AND OXFORD UNIVERSITY



Andrew Hunt is a social entrepreneur and manager of an award-winning fair trade project in West Africa. He is currently an MBA student at Oxford University's Saïd Business School.

What do you do?

Until very recently I was living in West Africa, running a fair trade marketing company called Gambia is Good. Its mission is to provide the missing link between small-scale rural farmers and the high-value tourist market. Absurdly, the industry had been sourcing the lion's share of its fresh produce from overseas. At this point I would normally launch into a diatribe including phrases like 'value chain' and 'backwards linkages', but I don't want to lose your interest so early on!

I guess the important thing is that my three years in Gambia got me inspired about the power of business to deliver sustainable development and alleviate poverty in sub-Saharan Africa. So now I am doing an MBA at the Saïd Business School at Oxford University, with a focus on social entrepreneurship.

What's that?

A tricky one to answer. Social entrepreneurship means different things to different people. For me it is about using markets to unleash the energy, efficiency and innovation of the private sector to solve the world's most pressing social and environmental problems. Two obvious examples are Grameen Bank's pioneering work in microfinance and Vodafone's innovative use of SMS technology in Kenya.

Social entrepreneurship has other strengths. It is a social movement which is able to attract talent which would have otherwise been turned off by the word 'charity'. I used to work in advertising, an industry pulsing with misdirected talent. Imagine what all those razor-sharp strategic planners and project managers could achieve if they were harnessed to tackle real social issues.

So how did Gambia is Good come about?

The venture is unusual in that it was born out of a partnership between an international charity, Concern Universal, and a private horticultural company called Haygrove. Concern Universal provides the link with communities on the ground, and Haygrove supplies the commercial acumen. We also work the Travel Foundation, an NGO which specialises in responsible tourism.

Gambia is Good makes an important contribution to the eighth UN Millennium Development Goal (MDG), which calls for a global partnership for development. This contribution and its unique partnership model have earned the project interest and plaudits. Last year it won the UK National Charity Award for International Development as well as the UN Development Programme World

Business and Development Award, which recognises core business practices that help advance the MDGs.

What were the best things about the job?

Living and working in West Africa was one of the most uplifting experiences I have had. The people are so welcoming, and the job itself was extremely varied: I worked with everyone from farmers and local business people to the international development and diplomatic communities. But the best thing was the knowledge that if I did a really good job then people would be empowered to change their lives for the better.

The experience also made me aware of the value of the skills I had acquired in advertising. On the UK job market my strategic-planning, project-management and creative skills were nothing special. Applying them in a developing country, however, was a completely different story. It was incredibly stimulating; though I'd never put in more hours in my life, it rarely, if ever, felt like work.

How did you get started?

If I'm honest it came out of an early mid-life crisis – a phenomenon which, I think, is becoming more and more common in London.

When I left university I secured a place on a graduate scheme at a major advertising company. It didn't take long for me to become disillusioned. The work was creative, but my productivity was being measured against sales of frozen ready-meals and nasal decongestants. Sunday evenings were gloomy, pervaded with a sense of pre-week depression. I started to feel as though I was squandering my time on earth!

So, after three years, I quit. I became a scriptwriter for TV, but after two series I was once again confronted by the same lack of fulfilment. Then Angus Davison, the founder of Haygrove and an inspirational innovator, offered me two months' voluntary work on his project in Gambia. That was a massive stroke of luck and an opportunity that I will always be grateful for. I stayed for three years.

Any advice for those interested in a similar career?

First, don't undervalue your skills. They may abound in the UK private sector, but they are almost certainly scarce within the emerging social enterprise sector.

Second, if any of this has struck a chord with you, don't hesitate to act. I have too many friends who have stayed in careers to which they are indifferent, paralysed by a fear of falling off the 'ladder'. If you work for unappreciative clients on projects that you don't believe in, you are wasting your potential. And at a time when the world is in desperate need of change, that is almost criminal.

I can guarantee your skills and energy will be hugely appreciated on the other side of the fence; you will be given licence to express yourself. What's more, you will never regret it.