Sisi ni Amani

The first year of Sisi ni Amani’s growth has been remarkable. Our model of community engagement has evolved to a point that we could not have predicted or even imagined in July 2010. The project's founding team arrived in Kenya with an idea for supporting local peace organizations that is barely recognizable today, and with good cause. What remained constant are our defining attributes of flexibility, adaptability, and our keenness to listen to our partners and stakeholders throughout the entire process of finding our niche in Kenya’s large community of civil society and technology innovators. Our openness to change allowed us to identify in September 2010, after approximately two months of trial and research, what we believed was a much stronger mode of engagement with our partner communities that fitted within our capacity as a small organization and remained true to our mission of maximizing the impact of the forces for peace in Kenya.

Our original idea was intriguing in its scope. Sisi ni Amani set out to map and strengthen a network of peace leaders across Kenya, who would be identified via 'crowd-sourced' SMS reports submitted by interested citizens or the leaders of peace groups themselves. After gathering information from citizens' SMS reports, we would create an online Ushahidi map that would serve as a comprehensive ‘peace map’ of grassroots organizations throughout Kenya, which journalists, peace groups, and concerned citizens could use as a resource. The Kenyan civil society leaders we spoke with during our first two months in Nairobi were impressed by our proposal, for it represented a novel application of existing, open-source technologies towards supporting the vital yet loosely-connected peace movement. They were additionally moved by the passion of our vision for the country, which was just two years removed from the brink of a civil war. However, the more strategic thinkers among them suggested that we first start by identifying a small number of communities in Nairobi in which to carry out a pilot project, and then proceed, if appropriate, to a national scale. It was sound advice that we happily followed, and with fortuitous consequences, for after entering our first slum in the east of Nairobi and rolling out a pilot launch of our idea in partnership with ten local youth groups, we discovered that some basic premises of our project were flawed, and that some important logistical assumptions we had made were off the mark as well.

The bootstrap startups of Silicon Valley have a well known saying among innovators, which is to "fail faster." We took this approach with high spirits and quickly realized that we could implement a few key changes to achieve profoundly greater and more-easily replicable results, for the future in this slum and beyond. We firstly shelved our "Peace Map" idea, for a few key reasons. First, an accurate map could have significant security implications, and yet pinpoint accuracy was all that was valuable at a very local level (i.e. a slum). Second, its creation would have demanded a too-large proportion of our energies and resources, while its potential utility for individuals living in the communities it 'covered' was uncertain, especially when we began to realize that in a slum, *everybody knows everybody* in the 'youth-group' field. Thirdly, we were conscious of the fact that there was little incentive for people to send us alerts and that our model represented a 'data-mining' relationship with the communities we worked with, rather than a reciprocal two-way information exchange by which citizen contributors could benefit from our work directly. We thus transitioned to our new proposed idea, which was **to**create a list of every mobile phone number in the slum, including those numbers' geographic data - down to the level of individual "villages," of which there might be 9 or 10 in a given slum - and disseminate locally-relevant information about peace and violence to those citizens if and when it mattered to them. This was a niche that nobody had filled anywhere in Kenya, and this was data that nobody had access to. Most importantly, this would be the first truly local source of instant news for the citizens of Nairobi's vast slum areas, and one that would be neutral and secure in a time of tension or crisis. We would prepare this network by the 2012 general elections.

First envisioned as a top-down facilitator and networker for "peace groups" throughout Kenya, our objective became and remains to this day to facilitate the dissemination of locally-relevant news, alerts, and information about violence, conflict, and political/human rights abuses to our partner communities throughout Kenya, via SMS, in order to prevent the eruption of political violence and abuse of power that marred the fallout of Kenya's 2007 general elections. We walked door to door for weeks, collecting people's mobile phone numbers and explaining the purpose of our project, in order to create a master database of nearly every mobile number in our partner communities and their associated area within the community. We now have over ten thousand phone numbers. Using our internet-based SMS platform, we gave ourselves the ability to send locally-relevant news to hundreds, or thousands of people at once, while paying market rates of approximately 0.01$ per text message. This would literally be our only administrative cost of any significance, in addition to minor travel and work related expenses, like notepads, snacks, and pens for long days of door to door outreach. If a fire erupted in one part of the slum, we could alert everybody in that village and the two or three surrounding areas to take precaution. Similarly, if a political rally took place in the slum and was turning destructive or violent, we could alert the entire community and local chiefs and police to avoid the mayhem and prevent it's spread. Still more, if a peace and unity rally was taking place at a local football field on one Saturday afternoon, every citizen could be invited, massively increasing the number of people in attendance.

So what has changed? Sisi ni Amani is no longer targeting what we called "peace groups" but instead entire communities. We no longer ask people to send us SMS-information about ongoing peace initiatives in their area, but to subscribe to alerts about ongoing activities or 'red-alert' news that they and their fellow community members need to know and act upon. We have reduced our overhead costs of operation to virtually zero as a percentage of our overall cost of operating, which is mostly dependent upon how often we disseminate urgent news to the communities we operate in. And finally, the composition of "we" has changed, for Sisi ni Amani is now operated and upheld by local civil society leaders - the real "peace heroes" we envisioned working with a year ago - in all three of our partner communities. They are supported by a vast network of Kenyan university volunteers we have brought onboard from universities in Nairobi and the Rift Valley. And for our partners on the ground, a strong sense of ownership and promise for the future is now palpable in their respective communities, as the power of a simple technology to effect change is, in this case, potentially transformative. This work will continue under the current Sisi ni Amani leadership through the August 2012 general elections in Kenya.