

Lifestyle

REIGNING CATS
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KAFKA'S METAMORPHOSIS FROM ANALYST TO VOLUNTEER

Nik Kafka gave up a well-paid City job to fly to Paraguay and help poor children. It was a decision that changed his life, writes **Emma E Forrest**

► Profile

GOOGLE has got a lot to answer for. After years of working in international finance in the City, Londoner Nik Kafka came across an interesting link thrown up by the search engine, and before he knew it had quit his well-paid job as a senior risk analyst for WestLB and was on a plane to Paraguay to work for a charity.

"I knew nothing about the country," confesses Kafka. "But the local charity, Fundacion Paraguaya looked interesting, and they were looking for someone with my skills to develop a new formula to help them achieve their goals."

IGNORED BY BANKS

The Fundacion Paraguaya had been offering microfinance — small-scale loans for the local businesses run by the nation's poorer people and normally ignored by banks — and business skills education to help local micro-entrepreneurs run their businesses better.

Nine months later, Kafka had helped to develop a financial model for providing kids from poor rural backgrounds with a first-class education without relying on fees, government subsidies or charity.

What makes the model so different is its focus on entrepreneurship and business skills.

"Young people in poor countries normally end up working for themselves, but no one ever teaches them in school how to manage their finances, maximise returns or market their products," explains Kafka.

JAWS DROPPED

"Our top priority was to make classes relevant to these kids — learning about Roman history is a luxury you can't afford, when just surviving from your family's small patch of land is a daily concern."

Fundacion Paraguaya set up a school in Chaco, a region that's poor because it's drier and the land is less fertile for agriculture than the rest of Paraguay. Rather than having the students stuck in classrooms, the charity got them out in the fields "learning by doing" — but instead of just learning how to raise chickens, lessons focused on how to make money out of raising chickens.

"We asked these kids how much money they'd like to be earning when they finish school. Maybe they'd say £50 a month.



When we told them how they can earn twice that, their jaws dropped — obviously attendance really isn't a problem."

EXTRAORDINARY RESULTS

Classes at the school revolve around 16 profit-making school enterprises offering a chance for students to develop the business skills that most young people in developing countries never get to learn.

The money made by these businesses then gets channelled back into the school to cover an increasing share of its costs — which means better teaching resources, and low fees.

"The results so far have been extraordinary," says Kafka. Within two months of graduating last year, all of the students had either started their own businesses, found jobs with major agricultural firms or gone on to university. "These sort of achievements are usually unheard of for kids from poor rural families."

When he returned to London in 2005 Kafka founded Teach A Man To Fish, a British charity now bringing this model to Africa where the need for such entrepreneurial schools is even greater. "The princi-

ples are just the same even though the environment and culture are often quite different."

The charity is currently looking to work with companies in Britain to offset carbon emissions through planting trees at schools in developing countries. "If a school earning income from trees is able to offer more kids a high quality low-cost education, and in doing so reduces the impact of a British company's carbon emissions, then everyone's a winner."

At an individual level, Kafka explains, even relatively modest donations can make a big difference.

BLOATED BUREAUCRACY

"A typical micro-project like our organic vegetable garden program in southern Sudan costs £3,000 to set up, but generates around £1,000 a year for the school — a return on investment that anyone in the City would be proud of. In practice what it represents, however, is free school places for 35 kids who otherwise wouldn't get to go to school at all.

"When there are still people without enough to eat in the world, it can be tough

The Fundacion Paraguaya school in Chaco, Paraguay, runs 16 profit-making enterprises to help students develop their business skills



getting people to understand that our innovative and entrepreneurial approach to education offers a realistic long-term means of reducing poverty — but it does."

Just over a year in, and Teach A Man To Fish has already attracted the backing of multi-millionaire and the first president of eBay Jeff Skoll. Now the projects that the charity has seeded are starting to bloom.

POOREST COUNTRIES

Despite its significant powers, the charity is still relatively small, so overheads are very low and donations go directly to helping children on the ground, rather than being soaked into a bloated bureaucracy like with more established charities.

"Obviously, quitting your City job to become a social entrepreneur is not a lifestyle choice that everyone can or should make," says Kafka.

"Nonetheless, backing a charity that's putting business at the heart of schools in some of the world's poorest countries has to be a venture well worth supporting."

For information visit www.teachamantofish.org.uk or email info@teachamantofish.org.uk

'Our approach to education offers a realistic long-term means of reducing poverty'