

Street Kids International and Social Innovation

Street Kids International Seven Social Technologies A discussion of our organizational methodologies

I Organizational Overview

Street Kids International is a Canadian-based international not-for-profit organization that is consistently recognized and honoured globally for its cutting edge practices and approaches to working with marginalized youth around the world. Our mandate is to give street involved youth in Canada and around the world the choices, skills, and opportunities to make better lives for themselves. Street Kids International has been distinguished by its mix of direct field work, award winning training tools and processes, and its cutting edge work in the area of policy development and awareness raising of the global issues surrounding street involved youth. We operate primarily as a capacity builder in partnership with a broad array of agencies serving the children and youth that live and work on city streets in developing, transitional and industrialized countries. In any given year, Street Kids International is active in several countries in three to five world regions, developing and implementing programs of international and cross-cultural utility in association with local youth workers, their organizations and the youth they serve. Since our inception in 1988, we have kept a determined focus on youth as our core business. This focus has in turn built our reputation.

II Street Active Youth

Focussing on youth as a community asset is not a crowded field. Corporations and donors have a higher comfort level with targeting women and children. Street Kids International and many of its lead partners look upon youth aged 10 -20 as being the missing decade in social investment, policy innovation and critical thinking.

Adolescence is a time of many changes – physical, cognitive, emotional and social – and as a period of profound transition, it can also be a time of conflict and crisis. In SKI's experience, adolescence is also the period of greatest potential – a period of openness to new ideas, a time of genuine independence and an age of great growth. It can be a time of healthy transition, and indeed it represents one of the best entry points for broad based social transformation in communities.

Street Kids International and its lead partners provide the kind of flexible and dynamic programs that engage rather than alienate young people. But it is engagement with a purpose – to reduce HIV/AIDS transmission and infection, to address substance abuse and its long term consequences on individuals and communities, to build economic livelihoods that are sustainable, and to raise opportunities and awareness of more positive youth engagement and policy models. The work is not to eliminate the inherent risk taking nature of youth -but to focus young people on healthy risks such as moving past and questioning traditional peer group biases, gender roles or social castes. The need is not for coercive controls but for coaching and accompaniment.



Our experience is that while SKI's programmatic niche has consistently and intentionally been work with street active youth, SKI and its lead local partners have successfully leveraged our focused work with street active youth towards profound and lasting impacts on the broader youth serving sector in Canada and abroad.

Street Kids International is unique among major international development organizations in that for 15 years it has maintained an intentional focus on the development of rigorous program models, innovative youth work tools, and highly successful capacity building initiatives for one of the most marginalized groups on the planet - street active youth.

Street Kids International has remained committed to growing its intellectual and human resource base and its capacity to set new standards for work with street active youth. It believes that by being the best organization in its market niche it will invent the tools, methodologies and innovative social technologies that provoke genuine paradigm shifts in the way local partners approach direct work with young people, the development of their own institutional capacity, and the approach they take to intra-sectoral networking.

In turn, SKI believes that other groups with a similar determination to be the best at what they do are best placed to transfer – with SKI's coaching and support – SKI's best practices into work with other distinct populations of young people. SKI and its lead local partners have partnered with Ministries of Education in many countries to develop new curriculums and teacher training courses for work with in-school youth. We have worked with correction officials in many regions to develop specialized programs for incarcerated youth. We have worked with UNHCR to meet the needs of refugee youth and with Islamic charities to help them reach girls in traditional Muslim communities. By being the best at what we do, SKI is well placed to both challenge and support other youth serving organizations to set the highest standards for their work, and by sharing our successes and setbacks freely we hope to create a multi-directional culture of innovation and accountability.

B. Street Kids International's 7 Key Social Technologies

Street Kids International's approach to delivering the above mentioned Street Choices activities is rooted in seven key social technologies, all of which have been widely drawn on by lead partners throughout the youth serving sector – and many indeed represent the broadest impact of SKI's intentionally focused but systematically leveraged programming for street active youth.

#1 Social Entrepreneurs Approach to Capacity Building

While a chronic lack of stable funding remains a constant concern for most youth serving organizations, there is also a growing recognition that, in terms of professional development and institutional capacity, the majority of youth-serving agencies lack the service models and practical tools required to meet the needs and expectations of present generations of young people. Youth workers trained to be “expert advisors” and treat young people as “dependent clients” are ill prepared to meet young people's desire (and capacity) to develop their own health and livelihood alternatives, and to define their own life goals and objectives.

Youth workers based in traditional social service institutions are rightly criticized as being passive “managers of misery” rather than active “social change agents”, and most find it hard to respond proactively to the needs of the youth they serve. SKI and its lead local partners deliver capacity building programs that promote a paradigm shift in work with young people. The interactive workshops, innovative summer institutes and fully integrated in-service professional development programs, draw on youth workers’ existing experience and then both provoke a critical look at successes and shortcomings, and foster the exploration of innovative new tools and methodologies drawn from practice leaders around the globe.

At the heart of SKI’s capacity building programs is a “coaching” style of professional development – one in which SKI and its lead regional trainers cultivate youth workers’ capacity to think critically, respond creatively and become reflective practitioners across their professional endeavours. SKI seeks to change youth workers’ genetic code from that of “dispensers of charity” to that of “social entrepreneurs”. SKI recognizes that this change requires equal measures of support and provocation. It needs to respect the unique strengths and experiences of each youth worker, and must be grounded in both hands-on learning and regular room for reflection and renewal. SKI’s capacity building is, thus, “learner-centered”, “practice-driven” and “growth-oriented”.

Just as in the private sector, much of SKI’s work is to support a transition in youth work from “factory-work” styled, rigid and repetitive interventions towards flexible and responsive “knowledge worker” driven activities. SKI carries this work over into the development of locally-led facilitation and coaching teams that take the lead role as SKI’s capacity building programs go to scale in a given country or region. One of the most important legacies of SKI’s work in many world regions is the creation of these teams of coaches and trainers, which serve both to anchor SKI’s *Street Choices* initiatives and to drive a host of locally developed supplementary training initiatives.

#2 Initiative-Driven Partnership Development Model – Market Entry

Street Kids International is often asked how it selects its lead local partners. We are asked about our assessment criteria and ways to avoid the risk of partnering with “corrupt” or “incompetent” local institutions. Funders and other international organizations ask us about our thoughts on choosing exclusive local representatives. SKI’s simple answer to such inquiries is two fold.

First, it has been our experience that our best partners “choose us”. They do so by responding to our pilot activities (an invitation to a roundtable discussion, participation in an introductory workshop, or engagement in a pilot project) through a creative application of new tools or a proactive exploration of new methodologies. Great local partners take initiative without asking for SKI’s blessing or financial support. They are healthy skeptics who want to test out our materials for themselves before returning to follow-up activities with preliminary experiences and emerging contributions of their own. SKI responds to such initiative by linking these groups to subsequent rounds of capacity building or tool development – providing seed funding for innovative applications of SKI’s core tools, or proactive extensions to the reach of SKI’s work through locally-driven series of workshops. SKI coaches these groups in the development of new funding streams and provides specialized training for emerging teams of local trainers.

Second, good local partners have no desire to be our sole local representatives; rather they seek to engage as many other local institutions as possible in ever growing multilateral clusters of lead partnerships. Groups that ask to be SKI's exclusive local affiliate are politely declined, whereas organizations inclined to spread the impact of the Street Choices work are linked to funding and ongoing capacity building.

In this fashion SKI does not need to be an expert at assessing local groups, rather it needs to create opportunities for initiative and innovation to express themselves. SKI is able to avoid the pitfall of drawing second rate groups to its work because of possible funding opportunities by basing its partner selection not on what groups say they *will do* with SKI's support, but supporting groups who *have done* creative things in response to open ended pilot activities. SKI finds that this approach creates a virtuous circle of partnership development in which SKI's lead local partners in turn foster the development of their own initiative-driven lead partnerships and therein engender the exponential growth of a vital Street Choices network in a given country or region.

In the most mature of SKI's partnerships, SKI sees the ultimate expression of the "we don't choose partners, but the partners choose us" paradigm, when local groups switch from being recipients of grant monies from SKI towards being purchasers of SKI's consulting services. In many cases lead local partners that have gone on to generate independent funding streams for Street Choices based programs begin to build technical assistance from SKI into project budgets. In an almost unheard of practice in the international development community, SKI, thus, switches from being a funder of local groups (drawing on international resources) to being a recipient of funding from local groups (drawing on local, regional or international funding). SKI, therefore, leverages its initial investment into a new region and frees up scarce operational cash flow for R&D work and pilot programming in new areas.

As importantly, we have the strongest, demonstrable metric that we have built local capacity and not just talked about it. By building the local small-medium enterprise sector in social entrepreneurship we are building local, effective, democratic capacity to engage with governments, donors and business on major social-economic issues.

#3 "Open Source Code" Approach to Social Technologies

In keeping with SKI's commitment to the development of *social entrepreneurs* and its focus on *initiative-driven partnerships*, SKI has made a deliberate choice when it comes to the management of its intellectual property rights – be they connected with its youth work tools or SKI's *Seven Key Social Technologies*. SKI has adopted what the software industry refers to as an "open source code" approach. SKI actively "gives away" its social service "software" and then looks to lead local partners in return to dedicate time to improving this software and developing innovative new applications for its use. SKI has eschewed licensing agreements that restrict usage. Instead, it has signed terms of reference documents with lead partners that stipulate that any new tools developed in partnership with SKI, or as a result of an innovative uses of the Street Choices methodologies, will similarly be made freely available to all who wish to use them.

In this fashion SKI seeks to stimulate the enhancement and enrichment of its core social technologies. SKI gains value from its lead partnerships not through the licensing of proprietary products and processes, but through the

constant improvement and creative re-design of these key social technologies by a range of dedicated practice leaders. SKI generates broad and sustainable impacts with its tools and methodologies not by controlling their use, but by freeing up those who wish to improve upon SKI's work and feed these results back into new rounds of tool development and capacity building.

#4 Sectoral Approach to Program Development

When SKI initiates work in a new country or region, it is frequently asked what kind of youth serving organizations it plans to work with. During engagement missions we are frequently told horror stories about “bad” organizations, “unprofessional” NGOs and “tradition bound” governmental departments – usually with the expectation on the part of the information source that we will naturally shy away from working with such undeserving potential participants or partners.

But this form of pre-screening, or pre-selection of participants flies in the face of SKI's initiative-driven approach to partnership identification and development. Indeed, SKI's experience is that it is very hard to predict which groups will take the greatest advantage of, and receive the greatest impact from the Street Choices program.

Sometimes the most seemingly progressive NGOs will prove to have nothing to add to or gain from Street Choices, whereas the most backward seeming of governmental program becomes its surprise local champion.

Street Kids International has come to recognize over its many years of work with the Street Choices program that innovative youth work tools such as SKI's *Karate Kids* and *Goldtooth* videos or its Street Business Toolkit package, while immediately useful in the hands of experienced, progressive youth workers, must also be made accessible to front-line staff within more traditional government and non-government institutions. To genuinely build the effectiveness of the broader youth-serving sector, it is not possible to work only with a *select few* easy-to-serve institutions (usually specialist NGOs). Rather, all stakeholders must be engaged, with their experiences and values respected, and encouraged to participate in raising the genuine efficacy of assistance to marginalized and at-risk youth.

In SKI's experience this can only be done through training initiatives that acknowledge and begin with the operational realities of these organizations and their staff, yet at the same time foster the exploration of new approaches and methodologies. SKI's capacity building programs and demonstration sites provide an opportunity for the widest range possible of local participants to explore the many possible uses of the SKI's tools, methodologies and *Seven Key Social Technologies*.

Indeed, time after time during SKI's pilot rounds of workshop delivery in a new region, we see that ordinary staff in traditional institutions can be empowered to do extraordinary work with street-active and other marginalized groups of youth. Participants have often reported facing skepticism from colleagues and administrators, and of being racked with self-doubt regarding their ability to apply new approaches. Yet these same participants return to follow-up workshops to speak about “taking a chance” and finding out that they too could “make a difference” in the lives of hard to reach youth.

#5 Commitment to Keeping Governments Engaged

As part of SKI's overall commitment to fostering a sector wide impact, it has identified the need to engage the public sector and its many diverse youth serving organizations at every stage of SKI's work in a new country or region. There is a clear risk in many communities for the government sector to distance itself from programming for street active and other marginalized groups of young people. Indeed, there is an emerging tendency for governments to hand the whole problem of hard to serve youth over to the NGO sector – happy to wash its hands of this troubling population, ready only to invest in police and correctional responses to criminal behaviour.

But while SKI understands that the relatively more nimble and innovative NGO sector may be the best site for pilot work and creative program design, SKI also recognizes that without engaging government from the outset, SKI and its lead local partners run the risk of never being able to take their work “to scale”. SKI's R&D initiatives have been the home to many great inventions, but it has been in SKI's and its partners' work with government funders and implementing bodies that these inventions have been converted into genuine policy innovations.

A case in point is SKI's capacity building work within the *Street Health* program. In most regions it is NGOs who host SKI's pilot workshops and collaborate in the start up of demonstration sites. But it is only through patient work with government that one-off, voluntary, stand alone workshops become embedded in ongoing, mandatory, fully integrated pre-service and in-service professional development programs. And it is in these same in-service institutes for teachers, public health workers, police and child protective workers that SKI's core tools and methodologies serve as the foundation for locally developed *Street Choices* based curriculums for schools, and *Street Choices* driven public health initiatives in youth centres, street outreach programs and adolescent medical clinics.

Street Kids International and its lead local partners also understand that without the buy in of key stakeholders within public institutions, sustainable local funding strategies for ongoing rounds of *Street Choices* work will be all but impossible. For while flexible funding from private foundations and companies often drives the initiation of new projects, it is almost always government funding that will ensure their ongoing development and growth.

Street Kids International understands all of these features and, thus, makes a strategic investment in linking with government decision makers during engagement missions, in ensuring the participation of government employees in pilot workshops, and in fostering steadily improving working relationships with key policy makers and funders who influence how government institutions prioritize the use of their limited financial, human and intellectual resources.

#6 Leveraging of Cross Regional Strengths

Street Kids International generally takes a multi-country approach to program launch in a new market region. It does so not simply to achieve widespread coverage, but also because at a regional level SKI's *initiative-driven* approach to partnership development takes on a new level of importance. This is because SKI generally finds



that for a whole host of factors – most indiscernible during assessment missions – SKI’s *Street Choices* program will gain greater acceptance and application in one or two cities or one principal country.

Street Kids International's approach is, therefore, to cast a wide-net through an initial series of pilot activities scattered across a given region, and then focus its second stage of capacity building work in the most promising locations. This allows SKI to gain real traction in a few key demonstration sites, and then use these sites to leverage a staged in expansion of more intensive programming to neighbouring cities and countries. SKI can focus its coaching of local trainers in a few lead sites and then draw on these emerging teams for pilot and second round work in nearby communities. This keeps training costs lower and allows for a naturally paced rhythm of growth across a given region. Healthy skeptics in one country can be invited to see the work of colleagues in a neighbouring country – therein focusing SKI’s efforts less on “marketing” and more on creatively responding to local initiative.

As innovative practice arises in a new region, SKI’s cross regional strategy allows it to introduce locally developed supplementary materials and program models into neighbouring countries – and to once again draw on local trainers to lead in the dissemination of these new best practices. SKI thus enhances its role as a coach of local innovators and as a developer of new local facilitators.

Street Kids International successfully works this way in Southern Africa (with a Zambian hub), in Central Asia and the Former Soviet Union (with a lead partner in Kazakhstan), in Latin America (with twin hubs in Ecuador and Bolivia), and has delivered multi-year programs in Central America (supported out of Costa Rica) and the Pacific Rim (based in the Philippines and Thailand) within the recent past.

#7 Institutional Focus on Growth vs. Expansion

In many regards, staying true to the first six of SKI’s Seven Key Social Technologies represents an interesting challenge to SKI’s long term business plan. As an organization that at its core seeks to develop the institutional capacity and sector-wide legitimacy of a network of lead local partners to the extent that they not only successfully displace SKI from whole areas of work (thematic, geographic and sectoral), they then take over the lead role in the management of sustaining funding streams. SKI’s core organizational strategy is unique. Traditional notions of expanding one’s own customer base and holding on to market share seem to sit in contradiction with SKI’s core business practices and its mission to build local capacity.

Like any self-avowed practice leader, SKI seeks way to maximize its own institutional development and its capacity to lead while at the same time generating an impact on the sector in which it works. Yet the very social technologies it employs – an Open Source Code Approach to Intellectual Property, Initiative-Driven Partnership Development, the Coaching of Social Entrepreneurs, and Sector and Region Wide Engagement activities – mean that SKI’s internal development is often sacrificed for the development of its lead local partners. SKI’s *Key Social Technologies* compel it to lose control over much of what it initiates, and seem to ensure that no revenue or delivery partnership is static for too long.

So how does SKI develop as an organization and increase both the scale and scope of its mission-driven work? The answer has been to focus on “leveraging growth” vs. “expansion”. In a *leveraged growth* paradigm SKI seeks to continuously move up the value-added chain in its areas of work. As SKI hands over labour-intensive, poorly compensated and output-laden workshop activities to its lead partners – especially as they take programming to scale – SKI needs to find its niche as a well-compensated coach and trainer of trainers. As SKI spins off the day to day operation of large youth serving projects, such as micro-credit schemes or model drop-in centres – it needs to convert the practice based wisdom gained from this work into innovative youth work tools and codified youth work methodologies. In this vein, funding streams tied to higher order knowledge management work displace those tied to high volume, low cost direct service delivery.

Perhaps like many modern corporations, SKI has to constantly shift out of market areas where it competes only on “price” (in the not for profit sector, the quantity of outputs) towards areas where it competes on “technological superiority” (or in our sector quality of outcomes). Like modern niche-driven manufacturing companies, SKI recognizes that the dynamic growth of its “parts suppliers” (local partners) enhance its overall market edge (if not the scale of its vertical integration) – hence the growth of mutually profitable alliances of highly networked specialists becomes the goal.

Street Kids International’s ultimate success and sustainability comes as it blends its highly niche-driven commitment to being a practice leader with its rigorous culture of leveraging impacts through dynamic partnerships. Its focus on leveraged growth vs. absolute expansion means that it can achieve exponentially increasing impacts with only steadily increasing budgets. SKI regularly chooses not to lead on the implementation of large multi-year grants – funding, which comes with many management costs and often paper-thin operating margins. Instead, SKI seeks to leverage its value-added impact on these programs by taking on the role of a fee-for-service lead technical advisor, for which it is well compensated, and from which it can gain access to cutting edge social technologies and project funded “laboratory” space.

Street Kids International has come to understand that the apparent contradiction in wanting to increase its own revenue base while still “giving away” its best practices is actually a classic virtuous circle. SKI’s willingness not to hold on to managing existing program and revenue streams frees up its scarce human resource assets and intellectual capital to maintain its role as a “go to” practice leader. SKI seeks to become much less a low-cost, expansion-driven manager of projects, than a nimble, leveraged growth-oriented coach, advisor and change agent. Continued investment in SKI’s strategic planning, knowledge management and brand development activities will be a key to success in this growth vs. expansion paradigm. If done right, it will allow SKI to retain its commitment to its *Seven Key Social Technologies* while steadily increasing its financial stability and capital base.