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Business:
Policéntrico

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The project idea

At the start of her DPhil in Socio-Legal Studies, Diana was looking into ways of exploring her topic of interest. Her goal was to increase the understanding of the role that technology can play in supporting participatory processes led by the government in the context of peace building. Specifically, she wanted to analyse how technology could sustain participatory budgeting as one of the mechanisms favouring political inclusion in Colombian communities after the signature of the peace agreement between the Colombian government and FARC guerrilla. Participatory budgeting consists of allowing citizens to decide collectively how to spend a small percentage of the public budget allocated to their community, in order to get them involved in the decisions affecting them and in the way their community develops.

While participatory budgeting was an increasingly common practice, and many governments were interested in learning more about its application and effects, there was not much research on the role that technology could play to support the participatory budgeting process. At the time, there were no technologies readily available for data-collection-purposes that were being applied in the Colombian context. After a few months of doubts and research into potential collaborations to carry on her project, Diana stumbled upon a fellowship to build a technology-based intervention sustaining peace building.

The Build Peace Fellowship was promoted and funded by Build Up, a no-profit organization aiming to sustain peace building through research and innovation. It consisted of a grant and in-kind support for a year for a fellow-entrepreneur interested in developing and piloting a technology-based idea for peace building. One of the most interesting things about the fellowship was that it was connected to a network, called Build Peace, which held a conference every year to discuss the role of innovation for peace building with practitioners, academics, peace builders, engineers and policy-makers worldwide. This sounded very appealing and relevant in a research context. As Diana learnt more about the fellowship and Build Up, she started to realize that the best way to gather the data that she wanted might have been to create the necessary ►

technology herself, with the support of Build Up's grant and expertise in peace building, start-ups and technology development. She applied for the fellowship while working on her Transfer of Status examination and while reaching out to Medellin town hall in Colombia to see if they might be interested in supporting her research project. She was very surprised and honoured when she was nominated one of the three 2016 fellows of Build Up.

Initially, Diana's idea was to create a peace building technology similar to the one she had come across with when doing a summer project for Purpose, an organization working on citizen engagement that she had helped to set up a start-up in Colombia, called Movilizadorio. However, she realized that by reproducing an existing technology with slight tweaks she would have lost the opportunity to employ a user-centred design approach to design the software. Therefore, encouraged by the success in the fellowship application, she went on developing her own idea.

Thanks to the collaboration with Build Up and their team of six developers and designers that worked on the software, in just one year, Diana launched Nuestro Desarrollo, a website and online game providing information and allowing citizens to participate in Medellin's participatory budgeting process. After she conducted trial sessions of the tool with different stakeholders, Diana needed more financial support to fund the modifications that had been suggested during the first trial sessions. Moreover, she was not sure about how to license the tool to Medellin's town hall in order for them to use it in their annual participatory budgeting process after the research project ended. After some months of uncertainty and evaluation of different approaches, Diana started to worry that the project might not go through after all, as the funds and support of Build Up were about to run out.

She started to look around for new options and funds and she discovered two different opportunities. One was another fellowship - this time promoted by the Skoll Centre for Social Entrepreneurship at Oxford - which aimed to accelerate the social impact created by Oxford University researchers in any field. The other was a grant promoted by the no-profit organization ALTEC to support start-ups delivering technologies for the civil society sector in Latin America. In order to benefit from this opportunity and realizing the value of the technology developed with Build Up for Medellin citizens as well as for her research, Diana decided to create a peace building start-up. Suddenly, her work experience and unconnected applications all came together and, in March 2017, gave rise to Policéntrico. Policéntrico is a Colombian enterprise incubated by Build Up, which fosters local and sustainable development and peace building in Colombia,

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using participatory strategies to coordinate communities, the private sector and governments, in order to harness the power of collective intelligence and social innovation.

With the founding of Policéntrico, Diana suddenly found herself in the position of being able to carry out and afford - through the Skoll Centre Fellowship that she managed to obtain - the modifications and license process of the participatory budgeting tech tool. In just a few months, supported by the team of designers and developers still provided by Build Up, she modified the tool using a Design Thinking approach, testing, receiving comments and changing the product accordingly in an iterative process. In April 2019, after registering the copyright of the software and having overcome an administrative and bureaucratic process full of lessons about innovation in the public sector, Policéntrico licensed Nuestro Desarrollo to Medellin's town hall.

As Diana started to analyse the data gathered through Policéntrico, something unexpected happened. While Policéntrico was initially just a way to apply for more funds to carry on her data collection and to license the tool she had created, it soon brought more opportunities to Diana, thanks to her new status as social entrepreneur as well as Oxford DPhil candidate. Firstly, she was invited by Build Up to help them with the organization of the annual Build Peace conference, which was scheduled in Colombia for that year (2017) and which saw the participation of over three hundred attendees from all over the world. Thanks to her involvement in the conference, Diana got in touch with USAID, which became interested in Policéntrico and offered Diana \$100,000 for developing her start-up, covering the related administrative costs and the costs of running a workshop on innovation for ▶

peace building with community leaders. Meanwhile, as a newly elected Skoll Centre Fellow contributing to peace building efforts on the field, Diana was asked by the British Council to moderate a panel and present an essay at their own conference on peace building in Belfast. On this occasion, Diana had the opportunity to network with the Norwegian Refugee Council, which asked her to partner with them through Policéntrico for an initiative to train and support social leaders in the Pacific Coast of Colombia.

In just a year, what had started as a social enterprise to license a technology for data collection to the town of Medellin

in Colombia and to obtain the necessary funds for this purpose, was a thriving social enterprise, involved in several collaborations that had little to do with its initial objective. While still serving as a tool for licensing a technology, Policéntrico had indeed become a brokering organization, involved in the coordination of projects with different stakeholders and in consulting for peace building projects. The upcoming challenge for Diana was ensuring the completion of her DPhil without sacrificing the beautiful and successful impact initiative that she had started.

Key benefits & challenges

Setting up a social enterprise for data collection has brought several benefits to Diana both from a personal and a professional point of view. On a personal level, experiencing through Policéntrico that there are many different ways to have an impact in the world, Diana felt that part of the burden associated to her DPhil was lifted away from her. The stress of successfully completing a DPhil, ideally with an interesting and valuable project, diminished as she realized that her research, beyond providing a valuable certification on her CV, would not have made a large difference to the world, while she had much more to give in other ways to support the peace process in Colombia. This realisation enhanced her self-confidence, helped her to see ways of combining her academic knowledge with the delivery of impact, and made her appreciate how she could realize in practice an action research project, a methodology that she was hoping to adopt as a researcher.

On a professional level, Diana believes that this experience helped her to develop several key skills and capabilities, such as managing different commitments, dealing with banks and administrative duties, setting up a team, taking hiring decisions, negotiating, administering a budget, and convincing potential funders that they should support her project. Most importantly, it made her realize the importance of two key skills that she thinks will be vital in any profession she will end up undertaking: the ability to help people to perform at their best and the ability to understand how to build up a knowledge body out of what happens with her enterprise and research, in order to make it replicable in different contexts and throughout time.

Obtaining these benefits and insights required the

overcoming of several challenges, the main one being understanding how to balance research commitments with commitments connected to running a social enterprise. In her first year of combining these two streams of work, Diana put too much effort into Policéntrico and ended up lagging behind with her DPhil milestones. In order to compensate for that, the following year she was forced to give up good opportunities for Policéntrico in order to get back on track with her DPhil. While Diana feels that she has not found the perfect recipe yet, she has developed several ways of dealing with this issue. For example, she improved her time management skills and she has created for herself a daily schedule that sees her working on her research in the morning, when she is more awake and productive, and then switching into looking after Policéntrico and its projects once she gets tired or is not productive anymore research-wise. Additionally, she has learnt to say “no” to projects and requests that are not strictly necessary or strategic and she has improved her communication with her supervisor in order to be supported in and encouraged to remain focused on her DPhil work while being a social entrepreneur.

Other challenges were more strictly connected to her experience as a social entrepreneur. She had to learn how taxes, administrative duties and banking worked; how to create relationships with different stakeholders; how to manage payments when these were not coinciding with her funding cycles and how to translate her knowledge into something that she could put into practice for and through Policéntrico. Dealing with these different challenges made Diana appreciate the importance of remaining open to whatever happens, while keeping the focus on the end ▶

goal. Since it is impossible to foresee the final outcome and most problems that will arise out of a DPhil as well as out of a collaboration or a social enterprise, it is important to remain optimistic, flexible in solving problems and to accept that there is a part of uncertainty that will never disappear, no matter the approach taken. In this way, the stress will become manageable and challenges something

that can be faced, although not always necessarily successfully. In some cases, the best approach might even be to give up, for example when health and wellbeing might be compromised by trying to do too much on different fronts.

Advice for other researchers

According to Diana, the journey into social entrepreneurship is a real rollercoaster – very challenging and stressful at times but also very rewarding. Most of the time, it is difficult to envisage the end result of entrepreneurial endeavours and they are likely to require a significant dose of multi-tasking and flexibility. To make the most of working on a social enterprise while continuing to be a professional researcher, it is important to enjoy the process and remember it is a learning experience, like a DPhil or research project, but also to be ready to quit whenever it becomes too much of a burden. Based on her experience, Diana believes that, for those who will follow her steps, there will be many times when frustration and stress will be the main feelings – and it is in those moments that it will be fundamental to keep seeing the bigger picture. Moreover, it will be important to remain patient – setting up an enterprise or social enterprise is already difficult on its own so it is bound to be very challenging when combined with the need to complete a DPhil. However, with persistence, humility and remembering that going through the process is a success in itself, results will eventually come and the time taken and sacrifices made will be rewarded at some point in the future.

It is also important to remember that there is no need to think or start “big” when setting up a social enterprise. Most social enterprises start very small, with no office and just one founder/employee and then take it from there. What is required is commitment, passion and to manage well priorities. Additionally, it will be helpful to understand

the different languages, norms and expectations attached to each role that a researcher-entrepreneur needs to play. For example, the language and visual information that are appreciated in academic contexts will not be appropriate for convincing a funder to finance an entrepreneurial project or to deal with partners such as, in her case, a local council. In these instances, presenting a concrete, operational and inspiring idea, which proves to work, will be more relevant than talking about the underlying theory. A good way to wear multiple hats without overdoing it might be to hire a desk in a shared working space like a local hub, in order to separate even physically the work spent on the social enterprise from that spent on research. This has the added benefit of having the opportunity to organize professional meetings in a neutral setting and to get in touch with different entrepreneurs and learning opportunities.

In the end, however, the most important bit of advice that Diana would like to share is to prioritize always the completion of the DPhil or the research project. The credibility of any other project and the possibility to continue in other endeavours in the medium to long term is likely to be based, at least in part, on academic credentials. Therefore working towards them should never be put in second place, even at the cost of missing opportunities on other fronts. These opportunities or similar ones will come back and will be more valuable once the DPhil work will be done. Learning what to engage in and what to postpone for when the DPhil is over is a very delicate balance, but prioritisation is also part of the skills needed to run a social enterprise.