

From Marginalized Youth to Social Entrepreneurs

Etienne Salborn and Social Innovation Academy - Uganda

Entrepreneurs can come from anywhere. Imagine growing up in an orphanage with no access to education beyond primary school, and living in a community with limited opportunities for youth employment. Would you dare to dream of creating and operating your own business? What if your home is a refugee camp and all you have known is a world of violence, displacement, and deprivation? Would you have hope for a better life? If you are labeled as useless by society, could you envision a future for yourself?

Etienne Salborn helped build Social Innovation Academy (SINA) in Mpigi, Uganda, to provide opportunities for marginalized youth to become equipped with the skills and mindset to create their own career paths. SINA supports the formation of self-organized, “freesponsible” learning communities where individuals who are facing immense odds can take responsibility for improving, not only their own life circumstances, but also the circumstances of others and the well-being of the whole community.

A small start to a big problem

Sub-Saharan Africa has a large and rapidly growing youth population who face dim prospects for the future. In Uganda, there are about 700,000 entrants to the labor market each year who must compete for only 12,000 available jobs. Compounding the problem is the ever-increasing flow of displaced individuals who are fleeing violent conflicts in neighboring countries. According to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), Sub-Saharan Africa has 26% of worldwide refugees.

Enter Etienne Salborn, a German high-school graduate who chooses to volunteer at the Kankobe Orphanage in Uganda for one year rather than enter required military service. He learns that the children at the orphanage, even with excellent grades, cannot continue their education beyond primary school without the means to pay for it. Being an optimistic and determined young

man, Etienne decides to change this situation. Upon return to Germany, he recruits friends and family to cover the students' fees for secondary education in boarding schools.

This informal sponsorship initiative started to grow by about ten students per year. So, in 2009, Etienne created the Jangu e.V non-profit organization to manage the sponsorship program. Unfortunately, he soon realized that this nice program was not enough to ensure a prosperous future for these young people.

A secondary-school certificate—and then what?

Upon completion of Advance (A) Level Examinations, the youth could neither continue their education at university because of high tuition, nor could they find employment. Inspired by his master's thesis on "Peace, Development, Security and International Conflict Transformation," Etienne knew he could find a solution if he got the right people together. He convened an Open Space Dialogue with Jangu e.V. graduates, other students still in school, and international experts to explore a creative solution.

If there are no jobs available, then perhaps they can be created. An idea emerges of a space where young people could live together, learn from each other, and figure out how to turn challenges into opportunities. In 2014, SINA is born.

A radical pedagogy

Through processes that enable self-organization, personal responsibility, learning by doing, and commitment to community, SINA scholars transform their inner reality and gain skills to also transform their outer reality.

According to Etienne, "It is not giving information like a teacher, but helping them discover their own answers." The initial stage in the learning process is called the "Confusion Stage." In the beginning, the scholars do not possess a positive self-image, so this first stage focuses on unlearning limiting beliefs and activating innate potential by setting goals and taking steps to achieve them.

The next stage in the process includes life-coaching, personal vision, design thinking and taking on new roles to run SINA. This learn-by-doing approach disrupts the typical education pattern of using pre-defined solutions to familiar problems. Instead, the members must continuously create and test solutions to real-life problems for which there is no answer yet. For example, if the community runs out of water, the person responsible must understand why this happened, come up with a short-term solution, and adjust the future budget and plan to avoid the same problem next month.

The amazing effectiveness of this radical approach created a new problem for Etienne. The students in the program began to learn and progress faster than the program structure to support them. “How do I prevent the program from collapsing?” thought Etienne.

What can I learn from others?

Beyond SINA, organizations around the world are successfully using self-management principles and processes to operate complex businesses. Etienne knew SINA needed a more robust framework and tools to strengthen the program and allow it to adapt and grow as quickly as the students.

SINA uses Holacracy[®], an established self-management system of governance, to structure organizational roles and work. Members take on new roles as the situation requires. Power and decision-making are distributed beyond hierarchies and consensus, enabling members to do what needs to be done. No one needs permission to act, but they must all hold each other accountable and take responsibility for their own problems and mistakes. The community operates as a dynamic, transparent system that constantly improves as everyone senses tensions and brings improvements.

Building a social business

SINA is not just a place to live and to learn. Etienne understands that the scholars must be prepared to support themselves and bring positive change to the larger community around them. While at SINA, members learn about business model creation, customer discovery, prototyping, marketing and other skills necessary to create and operate a business that positively impacts their community.

A great idea and a solid business plan can get you started, but to gain traction the scholars must also learn to network, establish partnerships, generate revenue, and grow the team. The start-up teams are guided through multiple iterations in bootcamps until their model is validated and traction is gained. The SINA Global Accelerator provides additional support to enable continued personal growth, business scaling, and further job creation.

One example of a SINA Social enterprise is [Uganics](#), a business that produces natural mosquito repellent soap. Joan Nalubega was personally affected by Malaria as a child. Seeing a lack of options for rural Ugandans to protect themselves against mosquitoes, Joan developed a sustainable social business model. The soap is sold in the tourism sector and abroad with higher profit margins, allowing Uganics to subsidize sales into the villages at affordable prices. With its own soap factory established, Uganics graduated from SINA in May 2021.

In the words of a SINA scholar, “This place transforms you into someone different. It helps you discover yourself. You are using your passion to develop a future for yourself.”

Replication and impact

The SINA model is designed to move beyond empowerment by equipping the scholars with the capacity to take full ownership of their destiny. They quickly and cost-effectively move from dependence to self-reliance, and become both followers and leaders at the same time.

By 2016, the original SINA community had grown to 70 members; three refugees took the SINA model and successfully replicated it at the Nakivale Refugee Settlement. In 2018, the SINA Loketa Community was founded in the Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, one of the largest refugee camps in the world. Currently, there are 8 SINA communities operating in Uganda, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, empowering 375 scholars.

Etienne is not surprised by these developments. “It is not us going anywhere and saying this is what you need. People that are interested come to Uganda and experience deep transformation for themselves. When the scholars return home, they are equipped with the skills and resources. Most importantly, they

are able to replicate the process themselves. It becomes their organization. They own it and they run it.”

To date, close to 800 scholars have gone through the SINA program, creating 45 social enterprises and 289 jobs. These numbers may seem small at first, but the latent impact is unlimited. The seeds have been planted to transform a future generation from job seekers to job creators.

A vision of resilience and self-reliance

The SINA model is widely applicable to the challenges the world faces in 2021 and beyond. It replaces old behavior patterns of predict, control, and react with new capacities to sense, respond, and anticipate that are better suited for complex, uncertain, rapidly changing conditions.

Etienne envisions a self-replicating network of SINA communities with many individuals capable of producing innovative business models, prototyping and validating ideas, raising independent capital, creating jobs, and improving the quality of life for everyone in the community. The goal is to create a global movement of 1,000 SINAs and 100,000 social enterprises by 2035.

The potential in this model of self-management, “freesponsible” behaviors, distributed power, authority, and capacity to create is enormous. If you are a business leader, ask yourself if you really see the potential within everyone in your organization. Stop for a moment to consider the possibilities from this radically different type of leadership. Perhaps you worry about where future growth will come from. Perhaps it comes from the personal growth and transformation of the people.

As one scholar puts it, “Life is not about power, and life is not all about money. Life could be about impacting other people’s lives to make them better.”

Written by Betsy Sheppard

About Etienne Salborn



Etienne Salborn is a change-maker and founder of [SINA \(Social Innovation Academy\)](#), an award-winning model enabling disadvantaged youth and refugee communities in Africa to unleash their potential as social entrepreneurs.

He shares his experience with others as a lecturer for social entrepreneurship, a resource for the Asian Productivity Organization, and facilitator for the ChangemakerXchange.

Etienne holds a Master's degree in "Peace, Development, Security and International Conflict Transformation" and has been recognized as an "AACSB Influential Leader 2021" and [MIT D-Lab Innovation Ecosystem Builder](#).