

Begging-bowl tactic no longer an option for NPOs

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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South Africa is brimming with non-profit organisations seeking support for various noble causes. While highly rewarding, it's not an easy line of work, and the current economic climate in SA does not make fundraising any easier.

Relate Bracelets, however, has managed to buck the trend raising more than R36m in the six years since its inception.

We interviewed Relate's CEO Neil Robinson who unpacked for us how the NPO has managed to achieve such success in SA that it is expanding its efforts internationally. He also offers advice for other NPOs on how to remain sustainable during the current turbulent economic climate in SA.

■ *To what would you attribute Relate's outstanding success?*

Relate Bracelets is operated as a business, rather than relying on handouts for the more than 85 causes we support spanning health, education, conservation, social upliftment, children, empowerment, and more. We remain 100% not-for-profit, and our transparency is testament to this with all our numbers available on our website. But we run our daily business as if we are a public, 'for-profit' venture.

We put ourselves through the same rigours and tests that all other businesses have to pass to succeed. We believe that lots of little can make BIG change, so we engage consumers with small purchases – small beaded bracelets at till points of major retailers.



■ *What advice do you have for other NPOs wanting to mimic Relate's success?*

The begging-bowl tactic – the reliance on donations for worthy causes – is no longer optional for the non-profit sector. We cannot be living in hope that corporates and individuals will keep giving money, when the reality is, simply, that they can't afford to.

Many people give what they can, but it becomes difficult to give to others when many themselves are battling to afford the rising costs of living in South Africa (and salaries rarely rise to meet the need).

We have built our model to raise money efficiently and transparently, benefiting as many people and beneficiaries as we can. Our business continues to grow in a sector that is shrinking despite its best efforts to secure funding. But we believe

this proven model can make a difference to many more people to come.

There is hope for non-profits, if we simply adjust our mindset to operate a bit more like the corporate sector and get business savvy.

■ What should be priority areas for NPOs during economically unstable times - how do they remain sustainable?

Current funding models for non-profits are failing the beneficiaries they are trying to help. In light of South Africa's continuing economic difficulties, the reliance on donations is a dangerous way to operate a non-profit and hope to survive.

As non-profits battle to help the people they support, the unfortunate side effect of South Africa's deepening crisis is that more and more people are in need. And, despite constantly struggling for funding, organisations' workload continues to grow.

There are so many non-profit organisations, supporting incredibly worthy causes, all battling to be seen and heard in a sector with too many voices and not enough cash to be spread around.

Our formula is a relatively small spend that goes a long way. Every single person who purchases just one bracelet for under R40 makes a difference to the lives of many people.



Neil Robinson, CEO, Relate Bracelets

Does Relate form a further relationship with the causes it supports in order to ensure any money raised is made use of most effectively? Does Relate's 100% transparency extend to these causes?

We make a point of knowing how our beneficiaries operate before we form a partnership. They are transparent with us in terms of how they intend to use the funding and, as we are usually involved with beneficiaries on long-term projects, we see that come to fruition.

How exactly does the concept work from start to finish of a project?

Relate Bracelets is not only raising funds for beneficiary causes, but also contributing to skills development and job opportunities as well as enterprise development.

It's not just the causes that benefit from that one bracelet you buy for United Against Malaria, the Rotary Safewater Project, or the Amy Biehl Foundation, for example - it goes so much further.

Strands of beads are threaded by senior citizens in Western Cape townships, who supplement their pensions with the income they earn from Relate. Many of these seniors care for their grandchildren or foster children who have been orphaned by HIV/Aids. We operate across 19 different seniors clubs and help support approximately 400 seniors every week.

Relate also supports a group of underprivileged youngsters who earn an income by closing and packing all our bracelets while we upskill them through courses around their chosen future careers beyond Relate.

A portion of funds also supports disadvantaged fledgling organisations to grow to their potential, in turn creating economic and growth opportunities for others.

None of what we do would be possible without the retailers and, of course, the consumers – the people who buy the end product enabling us to keep supporting our beneficiaries.

■ **How is Relate innovating in the NPO fundraising space?**

We do not ask for donations. To get to the consumer, we partner with major companies like Woolworths, Clicks, Nando's, Tourvest, and more, to get our product to the end consumer.

In fact, we are now expanding to international shores with the help of Nando's. The company was our first major supporter and, with their help, we are expanding into the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. This will boost our sales dramatically.

Bracelets sold in a Nando's in Sydney, London, or Washington, now benefit the lives of many at home in South Africa.



■ **Does Relate have any plans to broaden beyond bracelets?**

We actually don't sell bracelets. We sell a model which benefits many along the way. It just so happens to be in the form of a bracelet. We are looking at new product development down the line, but for the moment we have a long road to travel. Besides, the simple T-Shirt never goes out of fashion. Why should a wearable tattoo in the spirit of doing good and helping others become passé?

From the bracelets, we have raised R36m, from the sale of around 2.2-million bracelets in support of causes in health, education, conservation, social upliftment, children, and empowerment.

Look out for our signature "R" bead, our commitment to transparency and accountability. When you see that bead, you know you are supporting a 100% not-for-profit social enterprise.

For more info on Relate and the great work that they do, go to www.relate.org.za.

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