

Social enterprise is changing - Neil Robinson

 By [Jessica Taylor](#)

24 Jun 2015

Relate, a South African not-for-profit social enterprise that makes and sells beaded cause bracelets, recently announced its phenomenal growth by 70% in just one financial year. With 500,600 bracelets sold, R8.276 million has been raised for a variety of charities, contributing to a total of R25.5 million over a five-year period.



Neil Robinson, CEO of Relate.

Neil Robinson, CEO of Relate comments: "I think the growth shows that there is an enormous consumer appetite for things with purpose and meaning, and also a growing consciousness of social responsibility."

We asked Robinson why social enterprise is necessary, sustainable and viable in a developing market such as South Africa.

Describe Relate's 'uniquely sustainable business model'?

At Relate, we use corporate thinking and put all our energy into generating our own funds to support the work we are doing. We make money using business know-how, and all proceeds go to making an impact.

Social enterprise is changing, or at least it should be. So many non-profits are still relying on funds from corporates and individuals, and investing so much of their time and energy into raising funds for the work they are doing.

Activist and fundraiser Dan Pallotta, in his Ted Talk on [The way we think about charity is dead wrong](#) (which has over 3.5 million views on TED), calls out the double standard that drives our broken relationship with charities. Too many non-profits, he says, are rewarded for how little they spend, not for what they get done. I'm in total agreement with this. Instead of equating frugality with morality, let's start rewarding NPOs and charities for their big goals and big accomplishments, even if that comes with big expenses. Let's change the way we think about changing the world.

■ The 'R' bead stands for authenticity, please elaborate.

We proudly place an 'R' bead on every single bracelet, an indication and promise of our transparency and accountability. We want people to recognise the 'R', and know exactly what they are supporting by purchasing a Relate Bracelet.

■ What is the process for selecting the beneficiary organisations?

Due diligence is done on all of our charity partners. We look at their brand health, their heritage, their numbers, measure projects efficacy, etc.

■ How do you allocate the funds raised?

We raise money by selling beaded bracelets that are handmade by the elderly at Ikamva Labantu Seniors' Clubs in Cape Town's townships. Many of them are the sole carers of HIV/AIDS orphans; some their grandchildren, others foster children.

The money goes towards the materials, the charities involved, and Relate's own social upliftment work, which includes skills development training for its staff, as well as investing in enterprise development projects with fledgling black businesses.

We have more than 60 causes, from wildlife conservation and health programmes, through to early childhood development

and women empowerment, and many more...

▣ ***Any exciting projects you're looking forward to?***

Yes. I can't name any at this stage, but we do have some big new retail partnerships on the cards. We are always in conversation with organisations. We currently have a new partnership with the Spur Foundation, which we are very excited about. The aim is to sell 67,000 bracelets to raise R750,000 for the Foundation's beneficiaries. Their beneficiaries focus on improving the lives of South African families, with a big focus on children.



We are passionate about all of our projects and we are always in the market to support and promote more worthwhile South African causes. There's a lot that can be improved in our country, so many organisations just need a little help.

▣ ***Which cause has been the most successful to date?***

Every person has a cause, or causes, that they identify with and they will purchase bracelets for the causes that mean the most to them. But, generally, we find all of our causes to be successful. It does help when we have a retail partner on board with a cause. For example, our bracelets sold in Woolworths, Poetry, YDE, Due South, Sorbet, Out of Africa, Indaba Curios, Protea Hotels, Clicks and CNA prove to be popular due to their visibility. Our retail partners really help to get our story out to the people on the street.

But all of our causal bracelets, or as we affectionately call them 'Relatelets', are available in stacks of 10 from our [website](#).

▣ ***What are your expectations for this year, in financial terms and in general?***

Our goal is to raise a minimum of R1 million every month, and it is definitely possible with enough backing. In February 2015 alone, we raised over R1.2 million.

If every employed South African spent R35 on one bracelet each year, it would mean close to a quarter of a billion rand towards these great causes every single year. It's such a small, simple thing to do, but it really could impact on our country in a big way. A small spend from each South African once a year could result in a big dent in our country's problems.

Relate's figures (independently reviewed) are available at Relate.org.za.

ABOUT JESSICA TAYLOR

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com
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