

Management & Leadership

African visionary trains his eye on public health

Kovin Naidoo is a man of immense energy and deep commitment to manifesting his vision of improved eyesight and public healthcare on a global scale, says Katy Chance

KOVIN Naidoo is a busy man. He has just got back from the World Economic Forum on Africa held in Tanzania, where he has helped establish eight eye clinics to date, and where he was joint recipient of the Schwab Foundation African Social Entrepreneur of the Year award, with his friend and Australian colleague, Prof Brian Holden. Rather disappointingly, he's not wearing glasses.

"I cheat," he smiles. "I've got contacts."

Indeed he does. The list of Naidoo's awards, chairs, projects and connections is a litany of hard work, commitment and the ability (and desire) to do a minimum of two things at once. Here goes: he is global director of the International Centre for Eyecare Education; he's associate professor of Optometry at the University of KwaZulu-Natal; he has a masters in public health from Temple University in Philadelphia and a doctorate of optometry from the Pennsylvania College of Optometry (both as a Fulbright Scholar); he serves on the World Council of Optometry's governing board and public health and development committee, as well as the global board of Optometry Giving Sight and is chairman of the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness. In 2007 he was named International Optometrist of the Year.

Born in Chatsworth, Naidoo graduated with a B.Business Science and Optometry from University of Durban-Westville. The first degree was done with a view to getting into public healthcare. He later wrote his first-year optometry exams in prison; he was detained

repeatedly for his political activism as leader of what is now the South African Student Congress and president of the Student Representative Council. "To be frank, my interest was never really in private practice," he says. "I was always drawn to public healthcare, rather than pure politics."

This was influenced by his parents who "pushed education" and especially his mother, a very religious woman who maintained "it's always better to express your religion through actions, not how much you pray," and also explains why Naidoo's brother is CEO of Greenpeace International. After his first degree, he wanted to study at a different university, but his student council said he couldn't go. "I always said as an activist that the collective had to decide, so I had no choice but to stay and study optometry — it was the best decision somebody else has ever made for me!"

The International Centre for Eyecare Education, which he calls I See (or IC, or ICEE) was started in SA in 1998, but began in Australia. "There was an assumption that access to eye testing and glasses was a simple matter, but our research showed this was far from the truth in the developing world."

Naidoo cites a staggering 607-million people as visually impaired or blind. That's about 10% of the world's population.

A year ago he published a paper for the World Health Organisation bulletin showing that global productivity due to refractive errors was about \$269bn a year. Inevitably, money talks: "We needed to validate the work we do and show there is a clear case to be made

worldwide. This isn't just a warm and fuzzy initiative."

However, the immediacy of correcting impaired vision can be a double-edged sword. "Eyecare offers a quick return to investors," says Naidoo. "Give someone the right glasses and the smile is immediate. It can be seen as a quick fix with an instant feel-good factor, but we need to see it as a long-term sustainable plan."

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Funding is vital and, as always, the only limitation to the number of projects they undertake. Besides an array of international donors, Standard Chartered Bank gave \$1m to support administration in KwaZulu-Natal. Nissan SA has donated significantly for a mobile unit and other resources including a project they're rolling out in Gauteng next month, and Discovery Health is a big funder for their child eyecare programmes.

Contacts Naidoo made during his time in the US are still helping leverage his work. This may be because the US knows a good thing when it sees one, and they saw several in Naidoo.

"I was desperate to get the right skills and couldn't find a single course that combined public health and optometry. My professor in Philadelphia said they'd also like me to study public health but they didn't have an appropriate degree, so I

said 'Find me one' — and they called me on it! So I did two degrees at two different universities concurrently. I was used to balancing study and activism, so it was a simple thing to replace activism with a second degree."

One of Naidoo's main pursuits is to combine clinical and public health studies. "Clinicians tend to see public health as on the extremes of an academic discipline, but I want to make it mainstream. Public healthcare issues are intrinsic to clinical professions. Training for public as well as private service need not be mutually exclusive."

Things are better now as public healthcare forms part of many medical degrees. When asked to join University of KwaZulu-Natal, which keeps him on top of his clinical and academic game, the university recognised the value in his extensive public healthcare work and said "he should do both," something he's used to doing.

He's also used to spreading the success. "I work with exceptional people around the world. They make it all happen." But Prof Holden, his "key supporter", is one he credits as a man who "believed in me as an African with all these whacky ideas and helped raise funds to support me to do more all those years ago".

They met at a presentation in South Korea in 1997 at which Naidoo gave a paper about the



PERSPECTIVE: Kovin Naidoo ... 'Africa doesn't always have to be a recipient but can be a global contributor'. Picture: MARTIN RHODES

two-tiered approach to public healthcare in optometry tuition. "The response was 'It'll kill our profession,' yet the World Council of Optometry has now endorsed the model."

Always one to put his donated money and his energy where his mouth is, ICEE has set up optometry schools in Malawi and Mozambique which offer two exit levels. After two years of study you have enough skills to work in the public sector, but not practise privately; if you study for a further two, you can practice in the private sector too. This is one of many examples Naidoo has of creating uniquely African solutions that go global.

"One of our crowning moments was when 100 people from the UK organisation and funder Sightsavers were sent to the Durban offices for a five-day training workshop — not to give it, but to get it. This shows Africa doesn't always have to be a recipient but can be a global contributor."

Proof of his thinking and acting globally saw Naidoo start a company in China in 2002 which manufacturers and distributes affordable lenses, glasses and optometrical equipment. Initially it was to supply just their African projects, but it now also supplies nongovernmental organisations and governments in the Asia-

Pacific rim, Latin America and the Caribbean.

Governments are high on Naidoo's list of people to do business with. "If you don't include them, you can never upscale. Often vision centres are opened in government hospitals, and we're behind it and working with them, but we're happy to be anonymous. Working with governments' infrastructure means costs can be kept down."

This doesn't mean he's never been critical of government, but you "simply have to collaborate."

"The only way to get sustainable change is for public and private partnerships to work closely with government; civil society alone will never be able

to address all our problems."

Naidoo is the ultimate collaborator and is not interested in surrounding himself with only like-minded people who keep telling him he's brilliant: "Sometimes you need people to tell you an idea is bullshit."

"Somebody once said that liberation of SA will not be done by sacrifices of the elite, but of the majority, and that's true in public healthcare too. We need every clinician to say let me make a contribution. Nobody can exclude themselves any more, and nobody can exclude the government. I learnt that in the political movement."

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Joburg lessons in the power of consultation

There were many reasons to celebrate and lots to learn at the recent Halala Awards, says David Lewis

AN UNUSUAL, possibly unique, event was held in Johannesburg recently. These were the annual Halala Awards presented by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA).

These are presented to diverse individuals and institutions that have made outstanding contributions to Johannesburg and its residents.

The event is unusual because it's focused on good news about Johannesburg. It's unique because of the diverse range of Johannesburg's citizenry represented there. The finalists for the awards include hard-nosed, risk-taking property developers, die-hard social activists, social entrepreneurs who have started food gardens in corners of city parks, and a police captain who has started a burgeoning soccer club that keeps 200 inner-city kids off the streets. They all mingle comfortably, exchanging e-mail addresses and war stories.

They do so because they recognise that their respective ventures need each other — property development in the inner city will not succeed in a devastated environment devoid of basic public services; communities will not cohere without decent shelter; children cannot find recreation in blighted parks populated by drug dealers.

In their own diverse ways all of these citizens contribute to the success of the projects of the others, and, in the process, build communities. In a city notoriously associated with crime, with urban blight, with social conflict, here we have a clear instance of social capital in action. Halala!

The policy wonk in me was struck by another unique aspect of the event. This was the presence of a number of city officials, including several councillors, and, naturally, staff members of the JDA. They too mingled easily with their fellow Joburgers, confident of their

productive relationship with each other. And so they should.

The day opened with a presentation of the JDA's activities on the inner city prepared by two sets of independent consultants. It should be compulsory reading for every local and national government official. The JDA is a municipal entity that invests in the built environment of Johannesburg. It acts as a catalyst for regeneration by investing public funds in the creation of infrastructure.

While, in line with mayoral committee priorities, it has focused on the development of the inner city, its interventions increasingly extend into disadvantaged township areas as well. It's also the agency that has put in place the physical infrastructure for the Bus Rapid Transit system.

Between 2001 and last year, the JDA invested about R1,1bn in 10 inner city projects in areas including Yeoville, Berea, Hillbrow, Braamfontein, Newtown and the Greater Ellis Park precinct.

Its investments include the building of transport and other basic infrastructure as well as public environment upgrades including paving, street lighting, parks and public art.

The consultants estimate that the JDA's investment in the inner city has catalysed private sector property purchases totalling between R14bn and R17bn and refurbishments costing R8bn-10bn.

A survey of private sector investors in the inner city rates urban renewal interventions as far and away the most important driver of private sector investment, significantly higher than financial incentives. They rate poor service delivery — that is, the possibility that water, electricity and other basic services will not be delivered to their newly built projects — as the key constraint to investment, with crime a distant second.

This interplay between public

sector and private sector investment did not occur "naturally". It happened because, in identifying investment activities, the JDA consults closely with the businesses and communities in the areas in which it has invested.

This partly occurs through formal mechanisms such as the City Improvement Districts, and at times in less formal consultations. But the key is that the JDA has recognised that if the private sector is to invest, then it is necessary that it and its immediate community be given the opportunity to identify the public inputs that it requires.

Compare this with national government and national business associations. The president has never met with Business Leadership SA, the organisation representing SA's largest corporations. He has, in the past few days, met for the first time with Business Unity SA, the most broadly representative organisation of South African business.

Our recent industrial policy document demonstrates no evidence of consultation with business in any shape or form.

It often appears that the most energetic exchanges between national government and business concern rigged tender awards, dubious black economic empowerment deals and meetings with subsidy-seeking lobbies. But until government recognises that a competitive nation requires competitive businesses, which in turn requires a government willing to engage openly and closely with business, all its elevated councils, commissions and policy documents will continue running into the sand.

Central government and local governments elsewhere should look carefully at what is going on under their very noses. They just might learn something.

■ Lewis is a professor at the Gordon Institute of Business Science and a director of the JDA.

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