

PLAIN INK: Stories crafting a better world

Mezzago, ItalyKabul, Afghanistan

Selene Biffi

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=622FhxVdt90>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qtK7LZtQCd8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kj7aBDnSnUo>



Year Founded:

2010

Organization type:

nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector

Project Stage:

Growth

Budget:

\$50,000 - \$100,000

Website:

<http://www.plainink.org>

Twitter:

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Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Plain Ink creates engaging comics, imagery and stories to communicate public health and other vital information to low-literacy communities globally.

WHAT IF - Inspiration: Write one sentence that describes a way that your project dares to ask, "WHAT IF?"

What if comics and stories could be used to provide communities the skills they need to positively change their surroundings?

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

Literacy is universally linked to poverty reduction and wealth creation (UNESCO, 2010). It however requires formal schooling or access to other learning occasions over time to be mastered, something that over 1 billion people currently lack globally (UNESCO, 2009). These missed opportunities make illiteracy a barrier to efficiently share ways out of poverty and pass on life-changing concepts accessibly, demanding new communication approaches.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

Plain Ink produces fiction stories that empower illiterate people to gain knowledge and skills to raise their families and communities out of poverty. As such, the stories may be about kids who prevent diseases in their villages by building a water filter, or about women learning to start small businesses to improve their family's livelihoods, for example. Plain Ink conducts regular workshops for authors and painters in Afghanistan, Italy and India to localise all aspects of creation and production, consults with resident experts to craft technical messages and involves target groups for testing and fine-tuning. To accommodate for different needs and cultural habits, we make our stories available in several formats.

Awards

Over 30 awards and fellowships received, including: Rolex Awards for Enterprise (Young Laureate), UNAOOC Intercultural Innovation Award, Top 99 under 33 leaders in Foreign policy (Diplomatic Courier), Young Global Leader (World Economic Forum)

Impact: How does it Work

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.

Plain Ink runs several activities involving stories that effect change including "The Qessa Academy" in Kabul, a unique school that trains unemployed young people – both boys and girls – to preserve traditional oral heritage. In a country where 8 people out of 10 are illiterate, our students learn how to leverage stories to pass on vital information on topics such as public health, food security and natural disasters mitigation. Qessa trains up to 20 students per year teaching storytelling, community development and English, placing them with local NGOs and Ministries once courses are over. Our students also regularly perform on radio and television, telling informative stories that teach thousands of people across Afghanistan.

Impact: What is the impact of the work to date? Also describe the projected future impact for the coming years.

Plain Ink has locally produced and distributed 7,000 comics on public health to slum schools in India, and up to 80% of the pupils stated they changed their habits after reading the comics (interviews have been carried out every year for up to 2 years after distribution). We also held 121 workshops on intercultural understanding for a total of 2,450 children, and trained 1,000 young people on social entrepreneurship in Italy, 50% of whom opened a startup. We have directly involved a total of 13,533 children in our educational activities in Afghanistan, India and Italy, using storytelling as a denominator for change. Plain Ink is currently planning to scale up its activities to reach at least 10,000 children in each country through our storytelling programs, with a view to equip half a million children and youth with the skills to make a difference in the next 10 years.

Spread Strategies: Moving forward, what are the main strategies for scaling impact?

In Italy we partner with Giunti – the largest children's books publisher – to have our stories on intercultural dialogue printed and distributed across the country (4,000 books to date). In Afghanistan we have been closely working with two radio stations and a tv channel to have stories performed by our students broadcasted across the country, spreading much-needed information while entertaining thousands of people. We are striving to involve other media in our pursuit to create a variety of formats for our stories (including videos and printed press).

Sustainability

Financial Sustainability Plan: What is this solution's plan to ensure financial sustainability?

Apart from the above Plain Ink works out ad hoc initiatives to secure sponsorships from small companies that want to set up CSR programs. It also offers paid-for, online and live courses on topics like creative writing, social innovation or startups creation in partnerships with libraries, tech centres and universities. Lastly, it sells comics and books from an existing portfolio or custom-designs for other NGOs, the UN and businesses.

Marketplace: Who else is addressing the problem outlined here? How does the proposed project differ from these approaches?

Even in a field as crowded as arts and education, Plain Ink presents a fresh model. Striving to create appropriate stories and formats, it taps into local talent to create new content instead of just distributing already published books as do READ, Books for Africa, Book Aid and many others. At Plain Ink we do not believe in dumping when other options are available. Content wise, Room to Read also produces stories to target children and literacy efforts, whereas Plain Ink address multiple audiences and poverty-related issues, going beyond literacy to teach practical skills.

Team

Founding Story

As an education specialist with a 8 year experience, the UN deployed me to Afghanistan to draft a textbook on community development in 2009. Finding myself working in rural areas where illiteracy affected 75% of the population, I began creating pictorials as a way to pass on vital information, involving the locals in the production. Seeing the difference the drawings were making, with the UN contract over I decided to focus full time on creating new communication tools and founded Plain Ink.

Team

The Plain Ink core team currently consists of 7 people, 3 of which are full time (CEO, PR and Communications, Afghanistan Country Director). The part-time roles include a creative director, a graphic artists, workshops coordinator and webmaster. To this we add up to 7 teachers working at our school in Afghanistan, and several writers and illustrators contributing to our stories and books in Italy and India. Social media and online communications have been managed by an external agency on our behalf. Plain Ink has four advisors at the moment, covering areas such as the media, academia and international organizations.

File attachments:

-  [una nonna i valigia.jpg](#)
-  [otto piani fino in china.jpg](#)
-  [fumetti.jpg](#)
-  [plain_ink_cmyk-01.jpg](#)
-  [plain_inks_work.jpg](#)

Background

Please confirm how you heard about the Unilever Awards:

Changemakers Newsletter

Please confirm your role in the initiative (eg Founder/co-Founder) and your organisational title:

Founder and Executive Director

Which of the 8 UN Global Goals (Sustainable Development Goals) pre-selected for this competition does your solution relate most closely to? [select all that apply]

No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Gender Equality, Clean Water and Sanitation, Decent Work and Economic Growth.

Leadership and the Unilever Awards

Please provide examples of any previous entrepreneurial initiatives you have pioneered.

In 2005 I launched Youth Action for Change (YAC), a youth-led organisation offering free online courses to young change makers. Starting with a budget of \$150, I grew the organisation to 130 countries in 5 years, attracted a staff of 25 and trained over 4,000 youth. During this time I worked out strategic partnerships with Amnesty International, the UN and Oxfam, attracted funds from the Council of Europe and Starbucks and created strong media relationships with the BBC, MTV and WIRED.

A spin-off of YAC that I created – a citizen journalism platform called Forgotten Diaries – attracted 50 young bloggers from 10 neglected conflict areas and trained them in cooperation with the Pulitzer Centre and the CNN. Our articles were syndicated by several media outlets globally and ignited youth-led, peacebuilding projects in 15 countries. YAC received 34 awards for impact and I was named Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum at age 26, the youngest one ever selected for Europe.

In 2008 I was instead elected to the voluntary position of Coordinator at the Major Group on Children and Youth, an official lobby group at the UN Commission on Sustainable Development.

I decided to focus my attention on fostering transparency and impact, something the group had lacked since the creation of the Commission in 1992, according to public opinion. I recruited a team of 36 volunteers and built a platform to collect inputs from youth in 6 languages, sharing them with representatives from 53 governments. I also successfully lobbied to revive a UN scholarship fund to support youth delegates from developing countries. To increase the group's visibility and legitimacy, I delivered workshops at several UN agencies, the European Commission and Columbia University. These efforts led to a 50% increase in youth participation at UN meetings, our recommendations were included in UN Resolution 17/2009 and the Commission Chair declared our group the top performer, among the 8 official lobby groups.

I moved to Afghanistan in 2009 to work as "emergency curriculum development" expert with the UN, sure that my stint would be without problems, as the UN had never really received any threats or hostilities since 1949.

A month into it, a Taliban commando stormed a UN guest house killing 5 UN staff, and forcing the UN to evacuate its personnel and terminate most projects due to security reason. I was repatriated, but my determination to help Afghan people and continue my work, was stronger than the fear and the emotional toll that the attack had exacted. I returned to Kabul determined to finish my work and make a difference to honour the memory of those killed in the line of duty: I finished my book and successfully convinced the UN to produce comics as well, a format more suitable for illiterate audiences. The comics eventually received backing by the Afghan Ministry of Education for their effectiveness and became a teaching tool for children and communities across rural Afghanistan.

In 2013 I moved back to Kabul to pursue a dream I had since my first experience in Afghanistan in 2009: open The Qessa Academy, a vocational school that revives traditional oral heritage while training unemployed youth to foster development through storytelling, an effective teaching method in a country with a literacy rate of 26%.

Armed with only \$50,000 and my capabilities, I restored a mud house to host the school, plastered thousands of posters around Kabul to find students and secured top scholars and poets as teachers. Amid war and daily threats, I managed to keep the school open and offered 17 students - 8 of which girls - a chance to preserve the country's rich history and jobs as storytellers with top NGOs.

Beyond your existing team, who else are you working with to achieve your objectives, eg partners, advisors, mentors?

Plain Ink has been working with a number of partners in the past four years, including universities (INSEAD, IED), corporations (BMW, Silvan Heach, Giunti Progetti Educativi and many more), foundations (Only the Brave Foundations, 1% Development Fund of the United Nations, Linda Norgrove Foundation and others), ngos, schools and local governments.

We have built a network that allows us to operate even in difficult circumstances, supporting our work on the ground and helping us having an impact: from small clinics and slum schools in India all to the way of multinational companies and organizations, the help we've received allowed us to have a broad impact even with a minimal budget and staff (see numbers provided above).

Source URL: <https://www.changemakers.com/globalgoals2015/entries/plain-ink>