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A Conversation with Stefan Kappeler, Board Member

Ambika Samarthya-Howard
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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you introduce yourself and your background, and share a little about how you first heard about DDD [Digital Divide Data] and became involved with the board?

Stefan Kappeler: My name is Stefan Kappeler, and I’m the Chief Operating Officer of elea [Foundation for Ethics in Globalization]. I first heard about DDD when I met Michael Chertok back in 2011/2012, through a colleague of mine in Zurich, Switzerland. At that time, DDD was operational in Cambodia and Laos. At one point, we evaluated the possibility of setting up a DDD office in Latin America, particularly in Peru, which would have been an angle for elea to invest in. That didn't materialize because there wasn't enough market demand to justify an office in Peru. We stayed in touch, and in 2016-2017, elea invested in DDD. Since then, I've been a board member of the organization.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you talk about elea’s values and how your portfolio matches with what DDD offers?

Stefan Kappeler: Elea’s goal is to fight absolute poverty with entrepreneurial means. We are looking for impact entrepreneurs in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, and Southeast Asia, where we invest both capital and know-how. Our time-in-kind contribution helps organizations to grow from a business perspective and to become financially self-sustainable, and it also creates impact for people earning less than $3 daily. We have a portfolio today of 32 ventures in which we are invested, and with the entrepreneurs and the management team, we guide these ventures through their entrepreneurial journey.

We are entirely an investor. We invested in DDD in a convertible note that was then repaid. I remained a board member subsequently to that investment.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What makes DDD different from other organizations? What makes it work?

Stefan Kappeler: DDD looks back on 25 years of history. They have a lot of experience. DDD has had time to figure out and test things. Some things didn't work, some things did. I think we have a very committed and passionate founding team that is still involved through Jeremy. From the outset, I think a big strength of how it was set up was that DDD was never shy about asking for support and help. Not only financially, but from their network.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you give an example of that?

Stefan Kappeler: When we speak to entrepreneurs, they often see the board, for example, as more of a liability than an asset. We try to convince them otherwise. We say, the board sits in the same shoes as you. They carry even more risk because they have a liability, but they can't directly influence the day-to-day operations. It's a strong signal if people are willing to commit time and energy to becoming a board member of the organization. DDD, from the outset, very openly brought in knowledgeable people with a network into not only their board, but into their ecosystem.

The DDD board is incredibly diverse. We have people from Asia, Europe, Africa, North America. We have people from the investor landscape, from the business landscape, from the philanthropy landscape. I think this combination makes it powerful and is a big asset of the organization.

We also have a very strong management team and very dedicated associates on the ground who do an awesome job on the day-to-day basis. Hopefully, we are not only helping them make a first step out of poverty and into a regular job, but also toward making a professional career in the formal sector.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Coming from this diverse board, which is something everybody wants, what advice would you give to people trying to build that?

Stefan Kappeler: I don't dare to give advice, but what I would tell everybody is to embrace the board and see them as an asset, rather than a liability. The board is there, and from a governance perspective, it provides checks and balances. The board also appoints the CEO and potentially the senior management team. In the world we operate in, everything depends on the founder and the CEO and how they want to implement stuff. The board is an asset to help achieve this vision.

Embrace that because you have knowledgeable people around the table who are willing to contribute time and energy, to open their network, and maybe provide funding. Often, you don't have such a huge network simply by default. You might know a few people, but this gets multiplied by the people you have around the table. Everybody knows a few more people. When you know the right people, the people you need to know, it creates value for your organization. That is the power of community.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Looking back over your time on the board, what do you think have been the biggest changes in DDD? Do you think it's mostly the larger political ecosystem, or is it more about the youth changing in these countries? What seems to be most significant in that trajectory?

Stefan Kappeler: I'm not sure if there's one thing that stands out. Something that’s become evident over the past years is how the business landscape has changed. We're in the technology space, so we initially digitized content, which we believe is the future. We’re still digitizing content, and there is still business around that, but there is not a growing business around it. Now we're speaking about autonomous driving, machine learning, and all kinds of things that we hadn’t thought of ten, even five, years ago.

Where we bridge the countries we operate in is our training. AI is not as prominent everywhere as it is here. Self-driving cars are in the US, but they’re not that common even in Europe. We train and educate people about the work they do, so they understand why they're doing certain things. If they train a machine or a self-driving car, it's often very difficult for them to understand how this could ever work, or that it’s a business model and that millions or even billions of dollars are dependent on it.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Much of adapting to change is making sure you are letting go of things that are no longer useful, saleable, and marketable, and then adopting new things. Which of the two was harder for DDD? What have been some of the sticky points in terms of things people didn't want to let go of, or things that people didn’t feel it was the right time to adopt?

Stefan Kappeler: Given that we have always had this dual mission of establishing a business and at the same time creating impact, it can be even harder to let go of things. You are always aware that when you have trained people and they’ve become good at something, and then you let go of those business units or move focus away from those industries, some of those people might not have a job anymore. The new things we do might be more complex, or those people might not have the capacity to keep up with the organization’s demands.

I think this has always been, even at the board level, very thoughtfully discussed and debated. What does a move towards machine learning mean? What kind of work are we going to do? Now that we have agentic AI and everything else that is out there, we give it a lot of thought. What does this mean for the associates that we have in our offices? Because of that, I don't think the DDD organization, the DDD board, or the management team holds on to things unnecessarily.

It’s probably happened in the past, it's natural, but I think at the moment we are trying to figure out the sweet spot, to find where the market potential is big enough that we should build up knowledge in that space. Where do we have a network through which we can get access to customers? Where do we have associates we can train to deliver work of the quality that we want?

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: How do you define DDD's success, both as a foundation person and also as a board member? Do you define it by the number of people who pass through the program?

Stefan Kappeler: For me, it's a combination. I think the more self-sustainable DDD becomes, and the more we have created something that has impact without needing additional funding, the more we can say it is a commercial success. We are able to grow the business that we have, and ideally, generate a profit. On the other hand, we have always had this focus on bringing underprivileged youth into the formal economy, be it by simply training and employing them, or by facilitating them with stipends to work and study at the same time.

I think this focused impact approach sets us apart from other BPOs, where they simply say, First we need to be successful as a BPO, then we can have impact. For DDD, impact is more than a job; it's helping associates who've never worked in a white collar job get a white collar job, be successful in it, and potentially develop within the organization.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You started this conversation by mentioning an interest in South American offices. Is that something you think DDD should do in the next 25 years? Is scaling also about moving to different regions?

Stefan Kappeler: It can be. I would definitely not say no, but I can't commit to it. I think we should constantly review where there is a market need for the service we provide. I can imagine Latin America becoming an attractive location for services for the growing Spanish-speaking population. There are more and more businesses in North America that operate in Spanish. Some of this work could be done in Latin America, too. I think every organization needs to constantly rethink and revisit the strategy and ask, What move do we need to make next?

It might be that more locations are needed from a language perspective, or from a time zone perspective. It might also be that we want to bet more on the existing locations we already have and grow there, rather than expanding. Those questions need to be constantly explored.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Is there anything else you, personally, would like to see from DDD over the next 25 years, or even in the short term?

Stefan Kappeler: I hope that our customers, who already appreciate the work that DDD does, become even more aware of how impact sourcing can change individuals' lives. At the moment, and I know this is how things work in this world, it's often about who offers the lowest price; those are the people who get the contract. I agree that price is important, but in my book, it would be great if price, quality, and impact could come together because in the end, if we help underprivileged youth to get jobs, generate decent incomes, and have better lives, the whole society benefits.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you so much for your time and your insights.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer. She strategizes on communications, metrics, impact, product and technology, leveraging platforms for the network and creating cool content. She also leads the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of SJN that uses targeted research and analysis to identify and interrogate what's working and what's not in a particular sector or field. She has an MFA from Columbia's film program and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and Prism.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*