

The Skoll World Forum 2018: how collaborating across borders is creating social change

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This year's event sparked many vital discussions among inspiring social entrepreneurs and influential community leaders around some of the world's most pressing challenges, alongside awards, art installations, musical performances and fringe events

Sue George



Take 1,200 of the world's most motivated and dynamic social entrepreneurs, activists, philanthropists and academics. Put them together with inspirational speakers who influence not just through their rhetoric but also by their actions. Invite artists who add a new and creative dimension to effecting change. Then wait for the results of all the ideas that are sparked when they meet.

This is the Skoll World Forum (SWF) – four days of discussions, networking, inspiration and celebration based at the Saïd Business School at Oxford University, which this year took place between 10-13 April.

Lindsay Stradley, a delegate at the forum, is a co-founder of Nairobi-based Sanergy, which provides safe, sustainable sanitation in Africa's urban slums. "This is the seventh time that my co-founder or I have attended SWF. [It] is the best global convening of social entrepreneurs and the full ecosystem that supports our success. Every year we get new ideas, new operational partners, and new funding that expands the impact of our work," she said.



▲ Former US president Jimmy Carter, recipient of a Global Treasure award for his work with the Carter Center. Photograph: PR

The Skoll Foundation was set up in 1999 by Jeff Skoll - the first full-time employee and president of eBay. Focusing on the use of entrepreneurship for sustainable social change, the foundation has been led by Sally Osberg since 2001. Skoll is based in California, but the projects it champions come from all over the world. The inaugural Skoll World Forum was held in Oxford in 2004, with the first awards being given in 2005. In the intervening years, SWF has attracted many partners such as the Carter Center, Sundance Institute and PBS, while the idea of social entrepreneurship has also become more prominent over that time.

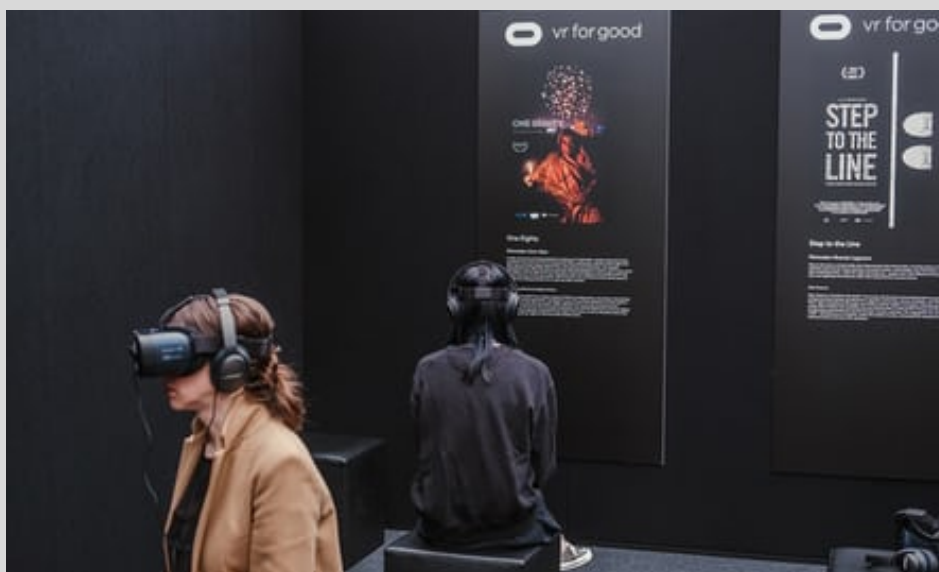
The theme for this year's SWF was The Power of Proximity. "You are problem-solvers, and you know that problems are not solved in isolation, nor from above, nor from outside. You need to be close to the problem, and close to each other,"

said Stephan Chambers, director of the Marshall Institute at London School of Economics, who was one of the masters of ceremony at the opening plenary. He spoke of "the absolute necessity of getting close to people and doing so through head and heart".

At this high-energy event, former US president Jimmy Carter received a Global Treasure award for the work done by him and the [Carter Center](#), which he founded in 1982. Among other projects, the Carter Center spearheaded the [global effort to eradicate the tropical disease guinea worm](#) (with incidences of the disease reducing from an [estimated 3.5m in 1986 to 30 in 2017](#)). Participants also heard from inspirational speakers, including Bryan Stevenson, executive director of the [Equal Justice Initiative](#), and Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, executive director of [UN Women](#),

Central to SWF is the [Skoll Awards for Social Entrepreneurship](#). These awards celebrate social entrepreneurs whose ideas have already had a measurable impact on some of the world's most pressing problems. Each awardee is given \$1.25m over three years to increase their impact. This year, awards were given to [Lesley Marincola](#), from Angaza; [Jess Ladd](#), from Callisto; [Jennifer Pahlka](#), from Code for America; [Barbara Pierce Bush](#), from Global Health Corps; [Anushka Ratnayake](#), from myAgro; and [Harish Hande](#), from Selco.

Many past awardees remain involved with SWF. From the 2006 cohort is Susan Collin Marks, peace ambassador at [Search for Common Ground](#), which sets out to build sustainable peace, working with all sides of a conflict to help find solutions. The organisation has since been nominated for the 2018 Nobel peace prize. "We wouldn't miss [SWF] for anything. The best part is spending time with our remarkable, inspiring fellow awardees. We leave uplifted and restored," she said.



▲ Forum-goers try out the VR for Good stall. Photograph: Alex Atack for the Guardian

Aside from the large plenary and awards events, SWF revolves around solutions-based conversations, including panel discussions and workshops where significant topics were mulled over, along with presentations from experts, and possible solutions to seemingly intractable problems. This year, these sessions had titles ranging from [Refugees and Migrants: Economic and Social Integration](#) to [Dismantling Invisible Barriers to Capital](#), to [The Art of Co-Creation: a Storytelling Model for Impact and Engagement](#).

There were also delegate-led sessions, where those attending give presentations or workshops on subjects in which they have expertise, working with other delegates to tackle global challenges in health, human rights or climate change, for instance, and come up with solutions.



▲ Delegates participate in the First Connections networking seminar at the 2018 Skoll World Forum. Photograph: Alex Atack for the Guardian

There was also a plethora of “ecosystem events”. These are independently organised events that took place all over Oxford to coincide with SWF, open to members of the public and people in the early stages of careers as social entrepreneurs, along with SWF delegates. These ranged from a debate at the Oxford Union on the role of universities in creating social impact to “Morning Story Revival: supercharge your creative spirit while you deepen your impact”, hosted by the Alliance for Media Arts and Culture.

This was Natalie Bridgeman Fields' second year as a delegate at the forum and her organisation Accountability Counsel hosted an ecosystem event in conjunction with Oxford Social Finance. “The Skoll World Forum community has brought together people who can transform the way impact investors think about and address harm from their investments. The deeply valuable conversation we began [during the Skoll World Forum week] will result in actionable change,” she said.

The arts are also central to the ethos of SWF. Poet Darius Simpson opened the event, bands played at the opening and closing plenaries, and Aloe Blacc closed the awards ceremony. The power of the arts to inspire and create change was highlighted in many ways. For instance, Awavena, an augmented reality film created by artist Lynette Wallworth in collaboration with the Amazonian Yawanawa community to share their story at a time of great change; and an interactive oral history installation, New Dimensions in Testimony, with interviews from survivors of the Holocaust and the 1937 Nanjing massacre, from the USC Shoah Foundation.





▲ Poet Darius Simpson opens the event. Photograph: Andrew James Bailey/PR

It was also clear that proximity is not always straightforward. One of the four musicians from the opening plenary band Ladama, and eight of the nine Haitian musicians from the closing plenary band Lakou Mizik, had visa difficulties that stopped them playing at SWF (although Aloe Blacc's band stepped into the breach).

Given the profound problems that still affect people all over the world, the next steps for many social entrepreneurs will no doubt be bold ones. Whether they should be aiming for Mars, as Gwynne Shotwell from Elon Musk's organisation SpaceX outlined at the closing plenary, is another matter. As the more down-to-earth founder of the African Leadership University, Fred Swaniker, said: "It's not about saving Africa, but about saving the world so we don't have to go to Mars."

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