

What does it really mean to put the user at the centre of international development? Lessons from Quicksand

SIX asked Kevin Shane, Principal and Communications Lead at [Quicksand](#), based in India, to share insights and lessons from their work.

What is human-centred design?

Human- or user-centered design is a framework or system of processes in which the wants and needs of an end-user is placed at the forefront during each phase of the design of a product, service, or system. It's ubiquitous in its application, which helps to shed some light into the diversity of clients Quicksand works with, and the projects that we do, whether in the corporate consulting space or in the world of social development. Engaging with end-users or beneficiaries in their context is a key component of HCD, and one that facilitates a deep, empathic understanding of an individual's perceptions and behaviors around a specific topic.

The HCD process manifests itself in a multitude of ways. In the interest of this post, I'll just share the manner in which we define it at Quicksand:

- *Empathize*: Immersion in an issue or challenge to experience it from an end-user's perspective
- *Define*: Building off the empathic insights, structure both the problem and a solution
- *Ideate*: Take the problem statement and proposed solution and craft a viable intervention
- *Prototype*: Create a tangible or even physical manifestation of the arrived at intervention
- *Validate*: Re-engage with end-users to evaluate the intervention's effectiveness

This is not a linear process, but a cyclical one: there is a lot of experimentation, iterating, failing, and returning to the proverbial drawing board before arriving at a "solution" that resonates with all stakeholders. This can be a scary proposition for some as it puts you in the position of having to see an idea you put a lot of effort into developing fall by the wayside. That said, adhering to this approach can lead to the development of more sustainable interventions, and ones that are valued and desired by the target audience. In the development space, this can translate to lives being saved.

What does HCD mean in practice?

The HCD approach is at the heart of our practice and directs the efforts of all of our client engagements and projects, which helps explain why we are able to work in such diverse settings and with such a rich list of clients.

To provide a bit of a snapshot, here are a few projects we've undertaken in just this past year:

[Mobile Learning Strategy for Employability](#)

Working with an education NGO in India, we worked with students (both current and those who have recently completed their studies), teachers, administrators, and the NGO staff to develop a framework for facilitating continued learning using a mobile platform.

[Evaluation and Redesign of 'Deworm the World' Training Package](#)

We engaged with all stakeholders across the value chain of a nation-wide health initiative to control the threat and impact of intestinal worms to analyse and improve the training materials it uses. We worked with each stakeholder in their context to understand the challenges and opportunities present to each, and then developed specific and relevant materials that resonated with them.

[Excess Baggage](#)

Working with an NGO in the EU, we engaged with the Government of Cambodia, and citizens of the country, to understand the prevalence of plastic bag usage and to design an alternative product with the intention of reducing the amount of plastic waste in three major cities throughout the country. A field team of three design researchers were embedded in-country for nearly a year in order to better understand the context, and worked with a behavioral change team to develop a campaign to educate people on the hazards of plastic waste.

[Innovation & Design Thinking for Africa's Malnutrition Crisis](#)

We led a week-long workshop in West Africa with a global humanitarian aid agency to both provide training in design thinking processes and to evaluate their malnutrition program to identify opportunities for innovation. Following this, a team of design researchers spent a month in South Sudan working with field staff to develop, test, and refine a system of tools for the identification and monitoring of severe acute malnutrition at the household level.

Challenges of working in this way

The most challenging aspect of working in this way is likely learning to not only accept, but embrace failure. It can be difficult for people to let go of ideas or concepts they've developed, especially when a good deal of time and effort has been spent in creating such. Suspending one's pride of ownership to allow the market to dictate your behavior is somewhat antithetical to business practices of yesteryears: the oft-cited argument against HCD is the Henry Ford quote, "If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse." The counter to this is, so what? That is a rich insight that could help facilitate the development of a product that provides exactly that. Perhaps it would not have manifested in Ford's Model T, but it certainly would have been an indicator that the current transportation marketplace was falling short of end-user's needs, and wants. Can innovation happen in a vacuum? Absolutely. But it is far more likely to develop a product or service that resonates with people and has the potential for sustained impact if it is designed with a clear understanding of what the people you are working with and for want and need.

Another significant challenge that can't be glossed over is the need to engage with people in their contexts. This is certainly not a practice that lends itself to keeping 9-to-5 hours nor working in the comfort of an office environment all the time. If you look at the work we've done in the water and sanitation space, you'll see that we spent hundreds of hours, over several years, in slum communities across India, visiting open-defecation sites, and even staying in people's homes to better understand the crisis, and to better inform the potential solutions we developed. Practicing empathy and treating every interaction with people as learning opportunities is not something that comes easily, nor quickly; it takes a great deal of effort to learn these skills, and a lifetime of practice since there is no finite end-point for your education in the space.

Opportunities for the field of international development

The opportunities and potential for HCD in the development sector are innumerable. There are far, far too many anecdotes that illustrate how not engaging with end-users before deploying programs lead to their failures. A great example of this is the [Play Pump](#) project (more articles [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), a seemingly innovative initiative that solved two problems at once: providing a platform for play for children in African villages, and harnessing the energy created by that play to pump water into a tank that makes it readily available for villagers. The shortfalls of this are many, but broadly speaking it failed because children got bored of using the merry-go-round-like device, making the interface obsolete.

There's has been a lot [written](#) about the need to inculcate a greater sense of innovation in the development space, and for being more [inclusive](#) of local organizations in developing solutions. Human-centered design falls in line with both of these objectives, in spades. Creating solutions to significant, literal life-or-death challenges thousands of miles removed from the context is quite simply as absurd as it is obscene, yet it is exactly this that is largely the current status quo. This lack of understanding of context and the socio-cultural

drivers behind many of the challenges faced in the emerging markets throughout the world is dangerous, and overcome by engaging with the individuals most impacted.

The rapid iteration and prototyping of solutions inherent in the HCD process can help ensure that challenges are addressed thoughtfully and effectively in a drastically reduced timeframe. Current approaches in the development space are predicated on designing a potential opportunity in proxy settings, deploying them in context, then evaluating their impact over an extended period of time. This can translate to a program floundering for years before the plug is pulled and a new approach considered. When you take into account that we are currently losing nearly [29,000 children](#) under the age of 5 every single *day* to preventable diseases, that sort of turnaround time on developing impactful responses is way beyond unacceptable. This is not to suggest that HCD is that be-all, end-all panacea to this shortcomings and failures in the sector, but it is certainly a more inclusive approach that has the potential to make a significant difference, irrespective of what development context it is deployed in.