

Impact Journalism Day: 48 media outlets unite to produce solution-based news

To mark Impact Journalism Day, the four pages that follow bring you stories of people and projects that are trying to help solve some of the world's many problems

Today is Impact Journalism Day, dedicated to focusing on solutions-based journalism. Forty-eight news organisations from 43 countries are participating by sharing stories of hope, change and innovation. Every news organisation participating in the Sparknews initiative is publishing stories that highlight solutions to global and local issues. Sparknews is a social enterprise that identifies innovative projects via its video platform, sparknews.com. The hope is that, by sharing these stories about people, places and events

IMPACT spark news Journalism Day around the world. Impact Journalism Day will inspire global change. At 'The Irish Times' we are committed to journalism that contributes to the betterment of society, and we are sharing these inspirational stories with you in that light. 'The Irish Times' is joined by the Huffington Post (US), 'Ta Nea' (Greece), the 'Sunday Times', the 'Nation' (Nigeria),

the 'Monitor' (Uganda), 'El Heraldo' (Honduras), the 'Times of India' and the 'Straits Times' (Singapore), among others. So far this year the initiative has resulted in more than 100 stories – which should reach 100 million readers, plus another 10 million people on social media.

Online Check out more Impact Journalism Day articles, on irishtimes.com

On these pages, and online at irishtimes.com, we look at an after-school initiative that is boosting literacy skills for disadvantaged children in Limerick; Iranian-designed lifeguard drones that outperform humans in lifesaving tests; a floating school in Nigeria; a mobile app that helps partially sighted people to overcome daily problems; and an orchestra using waste products to great effect. We invite you to get involved by sharing these stories – more are featured on irishtimes.com – with family and friends in print and online. Follow the

#ImpactJournalism conversation on Twitter and help the innovators and entrepreneurs in these stories to overcome the challenges they face by joining a brainstorming session (beta.makesense.org/ijd). We hope you will be inspired. KEVIN O'SULLIVAN Editor, 'The Irish Times' CHRISTIAN DE BOISREDON Sparknews To find out more about Impact Journalism Day, email impact@sparknews.com



WORD PERFECT

An Irish after-school project is fighting disadvantage by boosting children's literacy

Carl O'Brien

A few weeks ago Siobhán Neill took her six-year-old son, Conor, to McDonald's as a treat. She was about to ask him what he wanted when he surprised her. "He started reading out the entire menu," she says. "I couldn't get over it – to see him there with the confidence to be able to do that. It was wonderful."

Not so long ago she was consumed with worry about her son. His speech was badly delayed. He didn't seem able to construct proper sentences. He was falling behind other kids his age. They live in one of the most deprived parts of Limerick city, and she worried if he would ever catch up.

Today much of that anxiety is melting away. She puts it down to the work of an after-school project that is producing impressive results with hundreds of children across the State. Doodle Den, a new literacy initiative, is one of the most ambitious attempts to address education and economic inequality in the country.

By the start of school, children in low-income households may lag about 18 months behind their better-off peers in language development, vocabulary and communication skills. Doodle Den aims to bridge that gap with a big emphasis on learning through fun activities for five- and six-year-olds outside regular school hours.

Each day after classes end at St Michael's Infant School in Limerick, 15 schoolchildren gather for 90 minutes of intensive, fast-paced reading, writing and playing, led by a primary-school teacher and a youth worker. The peals of laughter mask what is a highly structured curriculum that involves careful documentation and evaluation of each child's progress.

After a pilot phase lasting three years, researchers at Queen's University Belfast produced an independent evaluation. The results were impressive: Doodle Den signifi-

cantly improved word recognition, sentence structure and vocabulary among the hundreds of children who took part.

There were also unexpected outcomes. Children were found to have better concentration and less problematic behaviour at school, and more were reading at home in their spare time.

"It's offering a real opportunity to give children a good start in life," says Marian Quinn, chief executive of the Childhood Development Initiative, which first piloted Doodle Den in Tallaght over a number of years. "Literacy is a core life skill without which later chances of full employment and active citizenship are greatly reduced."

Embraced warmly The project has been warmly embraced by school principals, parents and, most importantly, the children themselves.

"Even in a normal classroom you can see how the Doodle Den children are thriving," says Tracie Tobin, principal of St Michael's Infant School in Limerick, which hosts the after-school activities. "I'm amazed at how well they can write their own sentences and the confidence they have in the classroom."

It's a rare good news story against an ominous backdrop for many vulnerable children living in some of the country's poorest communities.

The economic collapse, along with reductions in social spending, has taken its toll on communities that were already struggling to cope with high levels of unemployment and early school-leaving.

For all the rhetoric about cherishing children and putting them first, Government investment in early years services is poor. State spending on childcare and early-years education is just 0.25 per cent of gross domestic product. This is the third-lowest of 31 countries across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. Yet research shows that the early years of a child's life play a crucial role not only in their later development but also in their capacity to earn more and do better in the rest

of their life. Doodle Den and a range of similar projects with a solid foundation of evidence-based results are being rolled out to disadvantaged communities, funded with a mixture of philanthropic and Government money. They are also cheap to run, at about €1,650 a child over an academic year.

A slew of research suggests that investment like this can yield dramatic returns. The National Economic and Social Council, an Irish government-funded think tank, says high-quality early-years projects can produce a return of up to €7 for every €1 invested.

This is because young participants are likelier to earn more later in life and are less likely to rely on welfare or end up in the criminal-justice system.

But campaigners have expressed concern at how sustainable these promising projects are.

A stream of funding from Atlantic Philanthropies and other private sources is due to dry up shortly. Under pressure to rein in public spending, funding for early-years services has been cut over recent years.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Network, which represents many of these early-years projects, says it is concerned that pressure on resources may lead to greater attention being given to crisis-led services instead. "Without a commitment to maintaining and expanding prevention

“The early years of a child's life play a crucial role in their development and their capacity to earn more and do better in life”

Early intervention A magic bullet?

By the time they are just three years old children of affluent professionals have typically heard millions more words than those of less well-educated parents.

Because language is so connected to reading comprehension, the most disadvantaged children face increased challenges once they start school and learn to read. Most experts agree that early intervention, such as high-quality preschool, is crucial to helping to bridge this gap.

Much of this evidence flows from a landmark report based on the High/Scope Perry Preschool project, which started in the US in the 1960s.

The results of 40 years of longitudinal research into the project's life-long benefits

■ **Having fun: Conor Neill and his class in the Doodle Den in St Michael's Infant School.** PHOTOGRAPH: BRIAN GAVIN PRESS 22

and early intervention, children and families will not receive the supports they need when they need them," the network said in a statement.

Tusla, the State agency responsible for child and family services, says it is working to embed early-intervention and -prevention work in its work on a long-term basis.

It says dozens of posts are being created to help deliver parenting and family supports across the State; it insists they will continue after philanthropic money has run out.

It is also rolling out a new "meitheal" approach to working in communities, a nod to the old Irish practice of neighbours working together at harvest time. In this case it involves closer co-operation between public services and agencies on the ground.

The practice has proved controversial in some quarters, with individual social workers complaining that it could pave the way for cost-cutting. This is rejected by policymakers who say it's about making the best use of resources.

Siobhán Neill needs no convincing about the merits of the early-years services her son is availing of. She says that she has seen Doodle Den's positive impact on Conor and that many others could benefit as well.

"He's devouring books," she says. "He loves reading. It's not homework any more. One of the things they do is 'tricky words'. They're supposed to learn them every second evening. But he wants to do them every night. He loves it. It's something which, I think, will stay with him for life."

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What the world can learn from Nigeria's floating school

Blessing Olisa and Adeola Ogunlade

Floating on 250 barrels, Kunlé Adeyemi's classrooms could be a model for coastal Africa

The Nigerian architect Kunlé Adeyemi has designed buildings and furniture across the world. After studying architecture at the University of Lagos, where he began his early practice, he joined the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), in the Netherlands, in 2001. In the Netherlands he worked closely with OMA's founder, Rem Koolhaas, being assigned to projects in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Middle East. He then founded NLE, an architecture and design company, whose name means "at home" in Yoruba.

Now Adeyemi is pioneering floating buildings to solve the issues of flooding and land occupation that affect hundreds of thousands of people in Nigeria and other African coastal cities, including the 85,000 residents of the Makoko slum in Lagos.

Alongside the houses built on stilts, a school designed by Adeyemi floats on 256 recycled plastic barrels. Designed with support from the Heinrich Böll Foundation and the United Nations as a pilot project, the three-storey wooden structure accommodates 100 primary-school children at any one time.

Established in the 18th century primarily as a fishing village, Makoko is now Nigeria's oldest slum. It was not counted as part of the 2007 census; the population today is estimated to be about 100,000. The community has almost no roads, no land and no formal infrastructure to support its day-to-day activities. At least half of the 4,000 structures in the community are on water, supported by stilts.

Although Makoko has some makeshift schools, they cannot cater for the increasing number of children in the area.

The floating school is aimed at generating a sustainable, inexpensive, ecological, alternative building system and urban water culture for the population of Africa's coastal regions.

"The desire to construct the school was born out of curiosity after I visited the community," says Adeyemi, "and by my interest in the coastal community, where, despite the little income made daily by the breadwinners, they have never stopped developing the infrastructures in the community."

Each of the floors in the school has a modern toilet and solar-electricity supply, which can provide lighting in the evening. The ground floor has an open space that serves as a playground.

As the only public space in the area,

the school quickly became a community meeting place where, when classes are out, market ladies park their boats and fishermen grab some shade to mend their nets.

When he set about building the school, Adeyemi's first step was to look around the community for design solutions. Makoko has an "anything that floats" mentality when it comes to building materials, so he decided to buoy the school on floating barrels and local timber.

Unskilled locals were hired to build the structure, with the idea that they could build their own homes with the techniques learned while erecting the school.

The floating structure adapts to the tidal changes and varying water levels of the lagoon, protecting it from floods and storm surges.

The school won the 2013 AR+D award for emerging architecture, was shortlisted for the London Design Museum's 2014 Design of the Year award and was nominated for the 2015 International Award for Public Art.

“The floating school is part of a plan for a sustainable, inexpensive, ecological building system for Africa's coastal regions”



Despite those plaudits it has not been plain sailing: the Lagos state government initially resisted recognising the school because the Makoko slum has been tagged as an illegal settlement. This means it had no government financial support. But on April 20th the Lagos state ministry of physical planning and urban development announced it was considering incorporating the school's structure into a regeneration plan for the entire Makoko community.

"This is a rare and significant moment in history, where innovation is finally matched with an equally open-minded reconsideration of established policies," Adeyemi says. It "is an important signal for mobilising the local and global interest that is critical for addressing the challenges and opportunities posed by rapid urbanisation and climate change in developing African waterfront cities".

Additional reporting: the 'Guardian'

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■ Learning curve: the school and (top) how other buildings could join it

The Daily Star, The Express, ANTEP, El Heraldo, Fraternité-Matin, THE TIMES OF INDIA, L'ORIENT LE JOUR, O GLOBO, Quotidien, Dainik Jagran, laRegion, CHINADAILY, Luxemburger Wort, L'ECONOMISTE, (24)heures, POLITIKEN, City Press, LA PRESSE, El Watan, L'Express, Courier international, HUFFPOST, AXA, TRIBUNE DE GENÈVE, EXCELSIOR, THE NATION, RZECZPOSPOLITA, THE IRISH TIMES, Le Messenger, LA NACION, The China Post, EL DEBER, Tages-Anzeiger, The Asahi Shimbun, THE STRAITS TIMES, THE SUNDAY TIMES, LE FIGARO, Daily Monitor, KOMPAS, Le Courier de Russie, L'ECONOMISTE

An app that sees for two

Justin Cremer

Sighted volunteers can help the visually impaired to see using a mobile phone's video camera

A Danish nonprofit startup has combined the humble video call with an army of volunteers who can see clearly. The result is an app that enables visually impaired people to "see" through a phone's video camera.

Be My Eyes was designed by Hans Jørgen Wiberg. Blind users who need help access the app using the iPhone's VoiceOver controls; then Be My Eyes calls the first available volunteer.

User and volunteer are connected through the video camera on the visually impaired user's phone; the sighted user lends eyes for daily tasks, such as checking the expiry date on food. Tasks usually take just a minute or two. It's a process Wiberg refers to as microvolunteering. "A lot of people want to do something good, but they are busy," he says. "With this app they have an opportunity to help out if they have time."

Wiberg, a visually impaired craftsman, presented his idea at a Danish startup conference in 2012. Less than three years later Be My Eyes was officially launched this January.

Thousands of users have signed up, and it now has about 200,000 sighted volunteers, 18,000 blind users and connections in 80 languages. Teething problems include long waiting times despite the fact that sighted volunteers outnumber visually impaired users.



■ Hans Jørgen Wiberg: "A lot of people want to do something good"

Wiberg hopes to expand into the developing world. The World Health Organisation estimates that 90 percent of the world's 285 million visually impaired people live in low-income areas.

But blind people aren't the only beneficiaries. After helping a blind man read a card he received in the mail, one volunteer from Hawaii posted on Facebook: "This is the first app that has ever affected me on such an emotional level, and the idea that my tiny contribution made a difference in some complete stranger's life leaves me with a huge sense of satisfaction... I feel like I'm getting more out of this app than the person who called me."

bemyeyes.org

Listen in silence An avatar who hears

A three-dimensional humanoid avatar is being designed to help students with hearing difficulties in Honduras.

The translation system captures a teacher's voice and translates it into Honduran Sign Language, displaying the results on screen through a female avatar who signs at the viewer.

Yeny Carías, a 32-year-old professor of engineering at the National Autonomous University of Honduras, says classroom experience with a student prompted her to investigate how software can be used as a mediator between those who can speak and those with hearing difficulties.

The student needs only a computer, a microphone and internet access. The teacher just needs to work on the correct pronunciation of words, which allows the avatar to pick up the message and translate it into sign language.

The team, which has the logistical and financial support of the university, is working with deaf people to record short videos with words in sign language that are later introduced into the software.

Emilson Acosta, a programmer, says that more than "700 signs have been recorded on video, of which 350 have been inputted to the graphic-design program".

According to the team, up to 70,000 people in Honduras have hearing problems. By the end of September, they hope, they'll be able to offer them the software.

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YANIVS IZAGUIRRE



■ Avatar: the software converts speech into virtual sign language

FROM TRASH TO TCHAIKOVSKY

Born from the detritus of a Paraguay landfill, the Recycled Instruments Orchestra brings music and hope to slum children

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Ines Ramdane

Many of the young people in the Cateura slum in Asunción, Paraguay's capital, pin their hopes on landing careers as football players or pop stars. Brandon Cobone's plan, on the other hand, involves a recycled double bass.

His instrument was cobbled together from garbage plucked from the nearby landfill that gives Cateura both its name and its smell.

The 18-year-old is a member of the Orquesta de Instrumentos Reciclados de Cateura, the Recycled Instruments Orchestra of Cateura, which uses music to give the children of the slum the skills to build a better future.

The orchestra was created almost by accident by Favio Chávez, a music-loving environmental engineer who was working with the *gancheros*, the garbage pickers who comb the vast landfill for recyclables.

"It started with a simple comment," he says, referring to the *gancheros*' request, after learning of Chávez's music skills, that he give their kids lessons. Chávez soon ran into a stumbling block. He didn't own enough instruments to go around, especially as his students' zeal sometimes resulted in inadvertently smashed guitars or cracked violins.

And so Chávez resolved to take advantage of one resource he had in abundance: trash. He made a violin out of a strainer, a metal dish and metal tubing. "It didn't sound like much," he says, adding that the next few instruments, including a guitar cut out of a piece of wood with a couple of strings attached, were not much better.

So Chávez teamed up with one of the *gancheros*, a carpenter named Nicolás Gómez, to make a variety of instruments that looked and sounded more or less like the real thing. Now the orchestra has versions of most of the instruments in a conventional set-up, concocted from cooking pots, bottle tops and melted keys.

Received acclaim

The orchestra won acclaim online when a group of film-makers posted a teaser for a documentary, called *Landfill Harmonic*, online in 2012. The documentary premiered at the South by Southwest festival this year. Since then the group has been flooded with invitations to play stages from Germany to Japan – and even toured South America as an opening act for Metallica.

Sandwiched between the landfill and the River Paraguay, the Cateura slum is a collection of low-slung homes, some made from raw brick and others pasted together from corrugated tin and recuperated trash. Sewage runs in muddy streets pocked with giant puddles of standing water and strewn with detritus fallen from the constant comings-and-goings of fetid garbage trucks.

The air is sour with the stench of the landfill, where many of the slum's



■ Trash band: the Recycled Instruments Orchestra of Cateura outside their music school. PHOTOGRAPH: LANDFILL HARMONIC

20,000-plus residents make a living as *gancheros*. And when the river floods, as it did last year, Cateura is submerged.

Chávez says the orchestra is less about forging world-class musicians than turning disenfranchised kids into fully fledged citizens. "Are they all going to be professional musicians? I don't think so," he says. "What we want is to teach a different way

of being, to instil in them different values than those that hold sway in their community. There the role models are the gang leaders, who impose themselves through violence and dominance," he says. "In the orchestra the role models are the hardest workers, those with the most dedication, the most commitment."

Morning lessons

The 40-plus musicians are selected for their dedication to Saturday-morning lessons. Once chosen they must also attend weekly rehearsals, where they prepare a

repertoire that includes Beethoven's Fifth Symphony and Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*.

Thanks to donations, the musicians now have conventional instruments that they use in rehearsals. But they continue to play on the home-made instruments, an integral part of the orchestra's identity, for performances.

"In Cateura nothing is formal, nothing is planned and everything happens almost spontaneously," says the French-born assistant director Thomas Lecourt, adding that their first international tours were logistical nightmares because many of the

Chávez says the orchestra is less about forging world-class musicians than turning disenfranchised kids into fully fledged citizens

children didn't have passports or even birth certificates. The rehearsals, the trips, the responsibility of being in the orchestra brings structure to their lives."

On a narrow site in the middle of the slum, workmen are busy building the orchestra's first permanent space.

Already a small cadre of teenage girls scratch out basic notes on their violas, apparently deaf to the cacophony of hammering, sawing and drilling all around. Boys making snare drums out of wood and metal scraps, with old X-rays as skins, add to the tumult.

"Joining the orchestra put me on a different track in life," says Andrés Riveros, a 20-year-old saxophonist in his first year of college. "And lucky for that, because a lot of my friends who didn't join are either drug addicts or in prison by now."

Cobone, who has visited about 15 countries with the orchestra, is also preparing to go to college. "From the time I was little I always wanted to travel, but I never imagined it would happen... and especially not because of this," he says, gesturing to his double bass, discarded wooden beams and a dented steel drum that once contained calcium carbide.

FINTAN BURKE

Slim pickings 15 million people worldwide make their livings from dumps

More than 15 million people around the world are estimated to make their livings from picking through waste. At the 12-hectare Dandora dump in Nairobi, health risks and international pressure have not deterred workers from scavenging in one of the largest dumps in Africa.

The dump has been considered full for more than 10 years, but more than 850 tonnes of rubbish still arrive every 24 hours. An estimated 10,000 people scour the site each day for material to sell in the nearby slum of Korogocho. More than half of the pickers are under 18, and they typically earn just under €1 a day.

Predictably, workers suffer from a myriad of health issues. "Because it's an informal living that they're making, workers don't have any protective

materials. There are no boots, no masks," says Wendy Erasmus, Concern's country director for Kenya.

A 2007 study by the United Nations Environment Programme found levels of lead in the soil almost 10 times the safe maximum, and half the children at the site had blood-lead levels far exceeding international standards.

Other hazards, including walking unprotected among medical and chemical waste and breathing in toxic fumes from routine methane fires, have led to widespread asthma and endocrine diseases.

When the Kenyan government tried to close the dump because of environmental concerns in 2011, workers took to the streets in protest. Those at the site said that it would cut off their sole source of income. "It's a

catch-22," Erasmus says. "People are making a living out of that dump. If the dump is moved to a new site very many people will lose their livelihood."

New opportunities are slowly opening up in the area. Four years ago Concern launched a programme that offered €200 to workers looking to learn vocational skills and establish businesses. Ninety per cent have reported some measure of success.

Korogocho's inclusion in the Nairobi county development plan could offer residents further hope. For now, Erasmus says, progress feels slow. "When you look at things like trying to find funding for malnutrition, we don't have difficulty. It's really looking at the urban context that donors seem to shy away from."

A girl's best friend: how canines can calm children

Kirstin Campbell

Honey knows that if Rebecca Baker gets upset her job is to lie on top of the eight-year-old and lick her until she calms down. If she senses any danger Honey sits down to anchor Rebecca to the spot until the danger passes. The pair, like many childhood friends, are inseparable. And according to Rebecca's mum, Michelle Barker, Honey has transformed her daughter's life.

Rebecca, who is from Cullybackey, near Ballymena in Co Antrim, has Asperger's syndrome, and in January last year she was matched with Honey, a golden retriever from Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland.

Honey was from the first litter of pups trained by Autism Spectrum Disorder Initiatives, so she is one of the first autism assistance dogs in Northern Ireland. The organisation currently has a seven-year waiting list, as it relies on fundraising and volunteer workers to train dogs, says Ann McGaughey.

"We find that the applications are predominantly for children with autism, where families who have reached a diagnosis are searching on the internet for interventions that will help their children," she says. Assistance dogs are particularly helpful

for children with autism, as they prevent anxiety, increase confidence and self-esteem and keep children with autism safe by alerting them to danger. "Whenever you see a child being matched with a dog, it is magic," she says.

Rebecca's mum says the dog has changed their family life. "Before Honey we were a family that never went very far, and we were very limited, but now we're always somewhere," she says. Now Rebecca wears a backpack when she's out that attaches to Honey's harness, and the dog is trained to act as an anchor by sitting down if Rebecca's in danger.

"She's so much more confident and willing to go to places she's never been before," her mother says. "She's a physical and an emotional anchor for Rebecca. I don't know if Honey's getting more like Rebecca or if she's getting more like Honey."

"Rebecca's fascinated with windmills, and all windmills should spin in her eyes. There's a windmill you can see from our house, and Honey will bark to tell Rebecca when it stops. The bond the two of them have is unreal. Honey keeps her safe and calm. She's a friend who loves her unconditionally."

She says Honey has become an extension of Rebecca. "It's been unbelievable since we got Honey; she really has saved Rebecca's life," she says. "When one's there, the other's not too far behind. Rebecca calls Honey her fluffy sister."

Next up Allergy-alert dogs

Hundreds of Irish-trained assistance dogs are being sent overseas to help people with disabilities, autism and diabetes.

Michael Henry of Service Dogs Ireland, in Co Louth, says that only about a tenth of the dogs they train stay in Ireland.

"Primarily our dogs are sent to the UK, but we also have dogs in France, Germany, Austria, Poland, Singapore and serving overseas with the United Nations."

Most assistance dogs are trained to work with people with autism or diabetes or who suffer seizures. They also help people with

hearing or mobility issues, Down syndrome, or psychological disorders.

Ireland's first allergy-alert dog, which is being trained in Cork, will learn to alert its owner when it senses scents in food and environments that can trigger an anaphylactic reaction.

About 360 dogs have been trained since Service Dogs Ireland was set up, three years ago. "The word is going out, and the level of need is absolutely incredible," says Henry.

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KERB YOUR ENTHUSIASM

The people of a town in Yorkshire are waging a guerrilla gardening revolution to reclaim their streets – in a nice way

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Anna Polonyi

Take the local train north of Manchester and you will spot a Hollywood-style sign on a hill that says “Kindness” in large white letters. It overlooks Todmorden, an old cotton-mill town and the birthplace of an urban-gardening revolution.

“I still get a thrill when I pick an artichoke here,” says Estelle Brown in front of the local police station. Brown is one of about 30 volunteers who make up Incredible Edible Todmorden, the gardening group that has made their west Yorkshire town famous by claiming public land and growing food for everybody.

Similar to Ireland’s Grow It Yourself movement, this one started with part of a kerb here, a corner there. Seven years and 400 volunteers later it adds up to about 1,000 fruit trees and two dozen raised beds around town: cherries and pears by the health centre, rhubarb and broccoli in front of the community college, potatoes and kale in the train-station car park.

Anyone can pick what they please: herbs are available year round; for the rest, volunteers stick a “pick me” sign in the ground when they are ready.

“We don’t like to call it guerrilla gardening, because that reminds us of macho warfare. We’d rather call it naughty but nice,” says Mary Clear, the group’s chairwoman, whose kitchen doubles as Incredible Edible Todmorden’s main headquarters.

Clear’s motto: “Sometimes it’s better to ask for forgiveness later than to ask for permission.” This applies to much of the movement, which appropriated public land, root by root, until the local council finally created an “incredible” licence that allows residents to grow food on patches of unused public property for up to three years.

The people of Todmorden have tapped into something both old and new. During the second World War the UK’s extensive Dig for Victory campaign encouraged people to grow their own food in public spaces, including Hyde Park in London.

Interest in urban gardening has grown over the past decade. Consumers wish to reduce the distance their food travels; city officials worry about food sourcing.

Wake-up call “The volcano eruption in Iceland in 2010 was a wake-up call for many. Transport was disrupted and the grocery shops were empty within a matter of hours,” says Catherine Simon, who advises foreign groups on how

to start their own initiatives.

If cut off from the rest of the world, most major European cities would be able to feed their inhabitants for no more than four days, she says.

Incredible Edible Todmorden never set out to make the town self-sustainable – the all-organic produce meets less than 5 per cent of the population’s food needs. But it takes the idea of traditional community gardens a step further than traditional allotments by being open-source: growing public food on public property. And supporting local food and businesses is at the heart of its mission.

An early example of propaganda planting was at the derelict Abraham Ormerod health centre, where the serial-killing GP Harold Shipman once worked. A place that passersby used to avoid became a flourishing garden. It was not long before the nearby community college and police station, both on the busy Burnley Road, had their own conspicuous raised beds.

The canal, which is popular with both boat users and walkers, is also a showcase for edible planting. The Canal and River Trust now welcomes planting next to tow-paths, after locals went ahead and just did it without asking.

“We wanted to reconnect people with each other. Food should be a celebration, not something we access 24 hours a day”

Along the Green Route of walkways are edible and bee-friendly plantings designed to bring a unity and identity to the town. The route creates a pedestrian circuit from the railway station, along the canal, through the health centre, with its fruit trees and “apothecary garden”, past the Hippodrome Theatre and back towards the market in the town centre – which is itself a showcase for local produce.

There is also an Aquagarden, a social enterprise that sprung out of the movement. The experimental learning centre breeds

■ **Street food: Todmorden’s urban renewal tastes good too**

fish and recycles their faeces to grow plants without soil. The restaurant across the street will soon be putting local tilapia on its menu.

Similar Incredible Edible initiatives are now in place in more than 20 countries, from Australia to Senegal, Cuba and Japan.

Incredible Edible Cloughmills, begun in 2011, says: “We wanted to reconnect people with each other, their community and the natural environment using the language of food. We believe everyone should have the right to access safe, healthy and affordable food, locally and we want to rediscover all the lost skills and arts surrounding food. Food should be a celebration, not something we access 24 hours a day.”

Growing its own

In southern France the deputy mayor of Albi recently pledged to help the local In-croyable Comestible team grow enough food to sustain all 68,000 inhabitants by 2020, becoming the first officially backed Incredible Edible town.

One of the many people Todmorden has inspired to be naughty and nice is Emilien Buffard, a 24-year-old who started an edible garden in Rosario, Argentina. With a few medical students interested in therapeutic herbs, he claimed a patch of public lawn for produce. “People at first were pessimistic,” Buffard says. “They said it might work in Europe, but here there is too much theft and vandalism. But why steal something that is already yours?” The garden has since become a local landmark, yielding avocados, lemons, oranges and aubergines.

Todmorden’s climate is unlikely to grow anything as exotic as Rosario. But the modest crew of volunteers who get together to dig twice a month know their town has become a magnet for “vegetable tourists”.

“Incredible Edible has made the town famous,” says Michael Gill, the mayor. “It took off more than anyone could have expected, and people now come from all around the world to see for themselves.”

incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk

On the breadline: how leftovers became a meal in Greece

Evi Saltou and Finnian Curran

Inspirational groups are finding companies with surplus food and giving it to people who need it

In the midst of the Greek economic crisis in 2011, a group of friends saved 12 cheese pies left over at a bakery in west Athens. They brought them to the local soup kitchen run by the church. Three and a half years later the group is co-ordinating the daily distribution of 4,000 or so portions of surplus food to charities all over Greece.

“I went to the two bakeries nearest my home, and they were only too delighted to help,” says Xenia Papastavrou, who founded Boroume (which means We Can in Greek) with Alexia Moatsou and Alexandros Theodoridis. “An average bakery could have as much as 30kg of unsold bread at the end of the day. I told a soup kitchen three minutes away, and they couldn’t believe their luck,” she says.

In 2014 the group rescued more than 1.3 million meals from the garbage. This was a 400 per cent increase in the amount of food salvaged and distributed to those in need compared with 2013.

Estimating the average value of each portion of food at €1.50, this amounts to a contribution of almost €2 million, say Boroume. “When we first set up our organisation we did not expect such a response or that we would be able to co-ordinate the collection and distribution of thousands of food portions per day,” says Theodoridis.

The salvage operation starts when someone calls Boroume with leftover food from a family dinner, corporate event or wedding reception, or from supermarket shelves. These donations, also sent through the group’s website, are then given to institutions in need.

Boroume has mapped all of the

food-aid programmes in Greece and made the information available on its website. Its database now has more than 660 potential recipient organisations, such as soup kitchens, and more than 180 municipal social services around the country.

The organisation relies heavily on volunteers. About 30 volunteers supported the group each week in 2014, and 65 new volunteers were trained. Last year the group launched an initiative to use fresh fruit and vegetables that cannot be sold and that would otherwise be left in fields to rot. Through this the team saved more than four tons of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Theodoridis says, “We are conducting meetings with farmers across the country to convince them not to let the agricultural produce they cannot sell go to waste. We emphasise that we organise for groups of volunteers to collect the produce according to strict rules, so that no damage to the crops is incurred.”

In Ireland, where one in 10 people lives in food poverty, Iseult Ward and Aoibheann O’Brien have set up a similar not-for-profit social enterprise, FoodCloud.

The pair estimate that Irish retailers produce about 87,000 tonnes of surplus food a year, most of it dumped at a cost of €8.5 million. FoodCloud also uses technology to link businesses that have excess food with charities.

When businesses have a food surplus they log on to the FoodCloud app and upload details of how much leftovers they have. Charities then receive a text with the details. If the charity accepts, volunteers transport the food from the business to the charity.

FoodCloud has facilitated the rescue of just under a million meals since the company was founded, in 2013. It helps about 300 charities, and about 10 tons of food is donated a week.

FoodCloud has just launched a partnership with FareShare, a similar organisation in Britain, to trial a FareShare FoodCloud app in 10 Tesco supermarket shelves. They hope to extend the app, which will work in a similar way to the group’s website, to FoodShare in Ireland, across the UK.

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■ **Stocks and shares: a man receives food at a centre in Greece that gathers food for the needy.** PHOTOGRAPH: ANGELOS TZORTZINIS/NEW YORK TIMES

After boil-in-the-bag rice, grow-in-the-sack vegetables

Mathias Wandera

In Uganda, growing crops in a bag is ideal for families with little space – or money to spend on market produce

Faced with expensive food, low incomes, high unemployment and barely a patch of arable land, residents in the suburbs of Uganda’s capital are adopting a novel form of intensive farming.

Sack farming is just what it says: farmers, usually those who are tight on space, growing vegetable produce in a sack. Renewed interest in urban farming globally has seen the concept adopted in cities around the world.

In the developing world, urban farming is important for households’ food security. According to Uganda’s Technical Centre for Agricultural and Rural Cooperation, 800 million people worldwide have had their food security improved through urban farming.

In Kampala, 40 per cent of total urban food requirements are accounted for through urban farming. For Harriet Nakabaale, a 45-year-old resident of the suburb of Kawaala, this type of farming is nothing new. Growing up, she was always told that every woman needs a garden. She learned how to grow vegetables in sacks from her parents, who used the technique at home on a small scale.

Stones in the sack

“I started by collecting huge sacks that had been dumped around my neighbourhood,” Nakabaale says, standing next to four big sacks outside her one-bedroom home. “Given that I have always had a poultry house, I was able to compost chicken manure that had accumulated in the coop. I mixed this with black soil to enrich the soil . . . added small pebble stones at the middle of the sack, right from bottom to

top, then filled the sack with soil, leaving the stones erect in the middle.”

The sacks, which are about a metre wide, dominate Nakabaale’s 10m-by-15m plot. In one of the sacks she grows spinach, dodo and carrots. Right in the centre of another is a young guava tree, surrounded by green vegetables. Spring onions, celery, tomatoes and spinach dominate another.

“Usually the crops with big roots, like carrots, go on the top, and the sides are reserved for those with small roots, like ordinary vegetables,” she says. “I water my sack garden almost on a daily basis, so I have no such a thing as a crop-growing season. My garden is ever green, even during the dry season.”

In the shade of the sacks are disused paint cans. Hanging on the veranda of the chicken coop are one-litre plastic soda bottles. All teem with crops.

Nakabaale, a mother of three, trains oth-

ers in the farming techniques for the equivalent of about €5.50. She earns about €275 a month from tutoring and from the sale of seedlings and crops, mostly onions and tomatoes.

Operations such as Nakabaale’s make very good sense in urban settings, says Richard Mugisha, an agricultural consultant at AgriProFocus Uganda, which promotes farmer entrepreneurship in low- and middle-income countries.

No need for rain

“We need people, especially in the urban areas, to engage in agriculture, regardless of limited land,” Mugisha says. “Sack gardening does not call for big space, and the farmer gets to harvest all year long – sack farming waits for no rain, but only calls for a bit of watering.”

For locals, market-bought fresh fruit and vegetables are often unaffordable,

“I water my sack garden almost daily, so I have no such a thing as a crop-growing season. My garden is ever green, even during the dry season”

even when available. The urban poor spend an estimated 50 to 70 per cent of their income on food, twice as much as their rural counterparts. So they are the most vulnerable to price increases.

When money is short, people will tend to adjust consumption towards high-calorie foods with low nutritional value. Urban agriculture has the capacity to overcome this situation by providing a secure source of nutritional food.

For Nakabaale the business has been a huge help. “I have kept my three children in school. We don’t buy foodstuffs from the market, because, much as I sell most of the food crops I produce, there is always enough left for home consumption,” she says before turning to greet some neighbours who have come to buy her produce.

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■ Roboguard: the latest model can carry 15kg of equipment at up to 50km/h

The rescue drone that could take over from lifeguards

Mildrade Cherfils

An young entrepreneur says his drones can save lives at sea – and even turn into hovercraft to bring swimmers back to shore

The Indo-Pacific sailfish, a big-game fish that looks quite like a swordfish, holds the Guinness World Record as the fastest fish in the sea. It has been tracked at speeds of up to 110km/h. By comparison, dolphins can reach a healthy 64km/h. The top speed of Michael Phelps, the record-breaking Olympic swimmer, was a touch over 6km/h.

Even the strongest seaside lifeguards, who have to tackle tides and surf, take a relatively long time to get to offshore swimmers in distress. But now lifeguards in Iran are getting help from aerial rescue drones.

Initially designed to fly above the sea and drop life-preserver rings to whoever is in the water, Amin Rigi's robotic lifeguard can in its latest version convert itself into a hovercraft and bring a potential victim back to the shore. "We think we can decrease the number of drownings and we can save lives," says Rigi, a 28-year-old robotics engineer who hopes to bring his rescue robot to the global market.

He envisions a future in which his unmanned aerial vehicles are used to help people who fall overboard from ships as well as those who are involved in car crashes, floods and fires, injured on hikes or stranded on oil rigs.

"We are thinking of drones that can actually be part of rescue missions," Rigi says, pointing out that most commercial drones are capable only of surveillance.

His most recent model, dubbed Roboguard, can land in and take off from

water, carry up to 15kg of equipment, and move at speeds of up to 50km/h. It will be capable of longer-range missions thanks to 15 minutes of battery power. The upgradable model can be fitted with thermal cameras, to aid night-time rescues, and it uses GPS and artificial intelligence to operate autonomously as possible.

Eventually, Rigi hopes the line will include a solar-powered landing platform where the drone can recharge its batteries.

Two summers ago trials in the Caspian Sea, where hundreds of people drown each year, included a race between the drone and a human lifeguard to reach a swimmer waiting 75m out to sea.

That first prototype, named Pars, after the ancient kingdom of Persia, reached the swimmer three times faster than the lifeguard, releasing a life ring for him within 22 seconds of launch. That beat the lifeguard, who took about 90 seconds.

The tests prompted more than 100 expressions of interest from 32 countries. With scant resources, Rigi could not re-

spond immediately. But now the rescue drone is on the verge of test production, with a run of about 200 expected this summer.

Distributors from Mexico, Brazil and Italy have already bought the drone, which sells for about €8,000. Customers from eight other countries, including the US, Latvia and Australia, are in negotiation. They are also being tested on beaches in Chile.

Rigi has moved to London with his company, RTS Ideas, to be part of Sirius, an accelerator programme that brings young entrepreneurs to the UK to help them launch their businesses. Now he gets help with living expenses, office space, mentoring and access to investors.

Rigi, who is the oldest of three children, credits his parents with nurturing his teenage interest in technology, especially robotics, and financing his early research.

Watch a video about the drone at www.sparknews.com/fr/video/drone-life-guard-save-lives

Firmly in the driving seat: Mumbai's women-only taxis

Raksha Kumar

A cab service in the city is providing training, careers and a new level of independence to its staff, as well as a sense of security to its female passengers

The traffic light turns green and Rupa Swali pulls out on to the Western Express Highway in Mumbai, careful to avoid the swarm of motorbikes and autorickshaws zipping past.

Suddenly a bus runs the light in the other direction and careens towards her, its driver leaning on his horn. Swali is used to this and slams on her brakes, then glances at the passenger in the back seat to check for a reaction. Fortunately, the woman seems absorbed in her phone.

Navigating the jungle of Mumbai's traffic has become second nature for Swali, who drives a taxi for a living. But until about four years ago she had never sat in a car, let alone driven one. That was when she decided to leave her physically abusive husband of 19 years.

Even though she was born and brought up in the city that is India's commercial capital, she was unskilled and unsure of how to earn a living. And she had a teenage daughter to care for. "I wanted a job that would provide me with dignity along with financial security," she says.

Of the nearly six million women living in the city, about half are daily wage earners living on the streets or in tiny shanties.

A management professional named Preeti Sharma Menon set up Viira Cabs (*viira* means courageous woman) in June 2011 to employ underprivileged women. She had launched the Viira motor training programme

six months earlier, and Swali was one of the first batch of 200 women it taught to drive. After six months' free training, 80 earned their licences. Several now drive for Viira Cabs, which now has a fleet of 16 ecofriendly cabs and about 20 woman drivers who earn an average of 15,000 rupees – just over €200 – a month.

Even though India has a few other taxi services offering women-only drivers, Viira is the only one that provides comprehensive training, including self-defence and etiquette. (Every driver is equipped with pepper spray and a GPS device with panic alerts.)

In a country where violence against women is shockingly prevalent – a woman is reported raped every 20 minutes, according to government figures – women-only taxi services are a relief to women passengers, says Menon.

In December 2012 the level of violence against women got international attention after the gang rape of a student on a bus in Delhi. She later died of her injuries. Two years later a 27-year-old executive was allegedly raped by an Uber driver in New Delhi; the trial in that case is ongoing.

"Given the background of women's safety in the country, I think a woman-drivers-only cab service brought relief to many women who commute alone, especially at night," says Menon.

Revati Sharma, a 32-year-old who lives in a suburb of Mumbai, uses Viira regularly. "My parents are increasingly paranoid about me travelling alone to work," she says. "I work in an advertising agency where there are no set hours. When I returned at 3am I used to see my mother waiting anxiously for me at the door.

"Now I call Viira when I have to return from late nights. And, frankly, I am also much more relaxed when a woman is driving. I can doze off to sleep."

viiracabs.com; watch a video about Viira at sparknews.com/en/video/viiracab-taxi-service-women



■ For women: Rupa Swali, Viira driver. PHOTOGRAPH: RITESH UTTAMCHANDANI



■ Setting sail: Corentin de Chatelperron and his team launching the Gold of Bengal; the workshop team bring the boat out of its hangar; on the roof of a jute factory, examining nautical charts; and sailing off the coast of Brittany. PHOTOGRAPHS: ZEPPELIN

NO MAN IS AN ISLAND

In a boat built from jute and flax a young Frenchman plans a round-the-world trip in search of low-tech innovation and self-sufficiency

IMPACT Journalism Day

Rosalie Hughes

One day in June 2013 Corentin de Chatelperron, a 30-year-old Frenchman, chased two scrawny chickens across a tropical island in the Indian Ocean. They got away, making his dream of self-sufficiency even more elusive.

De Chatelperron had been sailing around the Bay of Bengal on the aptly named boat the *Gold of Bengal*. He had made it himself from jute, a plant grown in Bangladesh, where he had been living.

His plan was to survive with only what he had on board. But his potato and lemon plants died. His bamboo mast broke after termites ate it. And his chickens, rattled from their time at sea, ran away the first chance they got.

De Chatelperron, an engineer and self-described handyman, says he learned an important lesson during his six solo months at sea. "When I'm alone, isolated and without the internet, I am pretty useless. I can't be self-sufficient by myself."

Lesson learned, de Chatelperron returned to France to start a new, more ambitious project called *Nomade des Mers*, or Sea Nomad. It aims to promote solutions that are simple, inexpensive and environmentally responsible and that respond to basic needs across the world.

With European economies struggling and environmental awareness on the rise, interest in low-tech solutions is mounting in Europe, according to Kris de Decker, founder of the online publication *Low-tech Magazine*. By launching *Nomade des Mers* de Chatelperron is positioning himself not only to be at the forefront of this movement but also to expand it outside Europe.

The handyman and his two full-time colleagues have created a website for sharing existing low-tech solutions and inventing new ones. Later this year they will build an 18m catamaran from jute and flax, which grows in France. The plan is to launch it in early 2016 and sail around the world, from France around the tip of Africa, across Asia, and then to the Americas. They estimate that they will reach 50 destinations in three years, promoting low-tech ideas at every port they dock in.

Another young Frenchman shows how to make rope from old plastic bags, apologising for the poor quality of the video, which appears to have been filmed in his bedroom. De Chatelperron explains that his vision for the project is to bring ideas people together. "There are lots of low-tech innovators out there – engineers, NGOs, handymen and women, and people in poor countries, for example. But they're all in their own corners. The idea is to bring them together."

In a Paris cafe, explaining the project, he rips open a waterproof bag – an unusual accessory in a cafe – to show images of the boat's design. He explains the kinds of people they hope to collaborate with on their journey – for example, with locals in India who use home-made pressure-cooker-like systems to make diesel fuel from plastic garbage found at sea.

Newideas

They will invite them aboard to demonstrate how to make the contraption, and shoot a video for the website. They will introduce the creators to the online community, thereby giving them access to new ideas they can adapt within their communities.

From then on the sea nomads will use the pressure-cooker-like device to fuel their vessel when winds are low. At each stop the crew hopes to pick up new ideas. The boat will become more self-sufficient, the online community will grow, and people from rich and poor countries alike will be working together to develop systems that are simple, cheap and good for the environment.

“There are lots of low-tech innovators out there. The idea is to bring them together”

This is the dream. It is not without challenges. Attracting people outside of Europe will not be easy, says Mathilde Richelet, who works for Roots Up, an NGO in Ethiopia hoping to collaborate with *Nomade des Mers*. "Most low-tech innovation is happening in poor countries," she says. "It will be difficult to find the people behind these innovations, because they're often in remote places."

Most people in the world don't speak French, the only language the crew are fully fluent in, and internet connectivity and literacy rates in the world's poorest areas may pose problems for a movement hoping to use the internet to spread its message.

But de Chatelperron is not deterred. "It won't work right at first," he says. "But by the end of the journey, I believe, we'll have it figured out."

nomadesmers.org; watch a video at sparknews.com/en/video/nomade-mers-low-tech-catamaran

Big ideas on the small screen: the reality TV show inspired by the Arab Spring

Rachel Williamson

After watching an Afghan talent show, Anna Elliot decided to use such shows' power to do social good

Reality television sometimes seems to be in a race to the bottom, but one woman's germ of an idea is trying to harness its power for good.

Anna Elliot, who is 30, was a US college student volunteering in Afghanistan in the late 2000s when the seeds were sown for her social startup, Bamyan Media. At the time Afghanistan's first reality TV show,

Afghan Star, had captured the imagination of the nation, and Elliot's theatre group always stopped rehearsals to watch it.

Thinking about how powerful the programme was, she also wondered how television could be made more relevant. "For me that meant looking at issues like, How do you get a job? How do you earn an income? How do you start a business with the skills you have?"

And so she helped to launch *Dream and Achieve*, a reality-TV show geared towards social change. Twenty entrepreneurs from all over Afghanistan, including a fish farmer, a hotel manager and a tailor, were filmed as they worked with consultants to build their enterprises and take home a cash prize. The show was filmed across 13 weeks in 2008.

After the first season Elliot returned to the US inspired. She began pitching the

idea of Bamyan Media, a social enterprise that partners with local production houses to make reality-TV shows.

The idea took off, and in 2012 Elliot was in Egypt prepping its inaugural show: a similar idea to *Dream and Achieve* that would try to build on the wave of entrepreneurial activity following the Arab Spring, in 2011.

"We wanted to take the momentum in the wake of that euphoric moment. After all, these kids have seen the power of what it means to come together, of what it means to achieve an objective that's not so dreamy any more," says Elliot.

Selling olive oil

The audience she wanted to find was the graduate from the midtier public school, the kid selling olive-oil products in Sinai, and the young adult struggling to find the government job his parents demanded. World Bank figures show that Egypt's unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 was nearly 40 per cent last year.

El Mashrou3, a cross between *The Apprentice* and *Dragons' Den*, was born. Part of its strategy was to help teach Egyptians how to start and run a successful business.

Airing from December 2013, the 13-episode season featured 14 contestants who completed individual and team challenges, from making products using a Cairo rubbish

dump and selling them to furniture stores, to being street-side juice sellers.

The winner was a 26-year-old pharmacist, Tina Boules, with her startup, Taqa Solutions, which aims to help poultry farms, bakeries and hotels to make and use biogas. She received the Egyptian equivalent of a €44,000 cash prize, and she is now in negotiations with a supplier in India.

Bamyan's global director of development, a former journalist named Asim Haneef, loved the way the contestants became role models and "mini-celebrities".

"It was amazing to see the tears shed when one of the great underdogs of the series, the T-shirt seller Mido, crashed out near the semi-finals after smashing all expectations and going all the way," he says. "The show ended up beating *Dancing With the Stars* in the TV ratings."

But the series' real value lay in introducing the idea of entrepreneurship to more people.

The year before the show hit TV screens, Bamyan toured regional cities to find contestants. Elliot says groups of aspiring entrepreneurs subsequently set up skills-trading networks. "It's like, I'll trade you a website if you give me 10 hours of pitching advice."

But working in Egypt is not easy for entrepreneurs – local or foreign – because of the country's opaque bureaucracy and lack of



■ On the road: *El Mashrou3* volunteers set up town-hall style events across Egypt

state support for small businesses. Elliot and Haneef admit they've learned a lot and will adapt the show accordingly.

Currently they're trying to nail down the next round of funding from corporate sponsors. And they are full of ideas, from taking *El Mashrou3* to other countries to developing new shows. Next up: *The Real Maids of Cairo*.

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