

The Road Map for FORGE

Executive Outline

By Curtis Chang, CEO of [Consulting Within Reach](#)

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The Road Map for FORGE

Preface

In the beginning of November, I was engaged on a pro bono basis to provide FORGE with a road map towards long term sustainability. You can read here for more about [how this process got started](#). The goal was twofold: 1) give FORGE actual guidance going forward and 2) give potential donors a sense of the organization's long term prospects if it survived its immediate financial crisis.

Because of FORGE's desire to have the report made public during the December giving season, I completed this project in only four weeks, which meant abbreviating the normal research process. I did interview Kjerstin in multiple sessions, met with the FORGE staff, spoke with the board chair, and conducted research with outside experts who shared insight into FORGE. While I am confident that the most important bases were covered, this should not be taken as an extensively researched report covering the entire organization. The reader should view this as a sketch of the key issues.

As has been true during this brief experiment in radical transparency, Kjerstin and I have agreed to release this document for the benefit of our sector's shared learning. You are invited to engage with your questions and comments.

1. FORGE as a pathfinder

Because FORGE came under public scrutiny via Kjerstin's broadcast for help during an immediate financial crisis, it can be easy to conceive of FORGE mainly as an organization that has gotten itself into trouble. While Kjerstin and her staff would certainly admit to making mistakes, I believe that is the wrong way to conceive of FORGE's current situation.

FORGE has pursued a new paradigm composed of three interrelated approaches:

- Address the plight of African refugees, a growing but relatively neglected problem
- Shift the paradigm from structuring refugee camps as "warehouses of pity" to treating them as opportunities for education, job training, and other forms of development
- Empower refugee leadership – a goal which, [as I've written about already](#), further extends the social impact of their work

As far as can be ascertained, there is no other entity – either as a NGO or formal government body (including the United Nations) – that is pursuing this paradigm. The fact that FORGE has incarnated this approach in actual projects at three different refugee camps means it has succeeded to a great extent as a "pathfinder."

By "pathfinder," I am referring to the way that a large convoy figures out where it needs to go when it finds itself lost in new territory and uncertain of how to proceed. A pathfinder might be sent out with the goal of finding a viable route forward. In order to accomplish its

mission, the pathfinder must travel lightly, react quickly, and be willing to take inordinate risks.

Two risks a pathfinder especially runs are a) running out of supplies; and b) losing touch with the main body. Ironically, a pathfinder can succumb to these problems even as it succeeds in its main task: the new route may be so far from the well worn path that the pathfinder ventures beyond the radius of safety.

FORGE has yet to learn how to manage these risks in an optimal fashion. It discovered its promising new route, but with the danger of a) running perilously short of funding and b) neglecting to network enough with more established parties.

Its immediate difficulties are traceable to its inexperience in balancing the rewards versus risks inherent in the path finding endeavor. I have elsewhere pointed out specifics of this inexperience, such as its [messaging to potential donors](#), or [the funding model](#).

However, it is important to reiterate that these difficulties only surface meaningfully for a pathfinder who is fulfilling its core mission: forging ahead far beyond where most felt it wise to stop. The ones who stay well within the radius of safety are rarely the ones who discover the new route.

2. Critical needs: fundraising and networking capacity

The organizational culture of FORGE – shaped to a great degree by Kjerstin - is heavily oriented to putting the needs of the field over internal organizational development (i.e. *“How can we justify purchasing a copier when this could fund a library in a camp?”*). FORGE staff members need to reassure themselves that for this next season, they have accomplished enough path finding. Now is the season for building FORGE’s own financial supply line and its relationships with the main body.

This reorientation is especially critical for Kjerstin. She has spent the vast majority of her time on program issues. By her estimation, less than 5% of her time has been spent on networking, and only slightly more on direct fundraising. In the future, she needs to spend more than 60% of her time on these functions.

While the priority of fundraising should be obvious, it is worth noting here why networking more broadly is also very important. There are three main reasons:

- FORGE needs more outside validation and legitimacy. This lack is most evidenced by the absence of any established expert in the refugee field on the board. Addressing this problem requires that Kjerstin get out there regularly in the settings where thought leaders in the field congregate.
- The organization needs to broaden its donor base, especially with foundations and high net worth individuals. This is only going to happen by developing a broader set of relationships than the ones FORGE currently owns.

- Finally, the role of a pathfinder is to bring its findings back to the main body. It may very well be that in the long term, FORGE's most scaleable influence will not be in the number of refugees it directly serves. I am unsure given all its limitations about how high its numerical growth ceiling can be. But I am convinced it can and should diffuse its ideas. For instance, it may be that FORGE will make its ultimate contribution by getting the United Nations Commission on Human Rights (which oversees most of the relief work in the camps) to incorporate aspects of its developmental model.

3. Short run tactic: pulling back its programmatic commitments

Developing funding and partnership capacity will take bandwidth and resources. FORGE needs to think of the next 1-2 years as a season where it maintains just enough of a presence in the camps to continue refining the model and building legitimacy, but pull back how far it extends itself programmatically.

Specifically, this means:

- Shut down work in the most costly of their three camps.
- Strongly consider closing programs like scholarships or microfinance that are non-essential to their model – and aren't a key source of operational funding.
- Further curtail time that Kjerstin spends on programming.
- Direct Abby Speight, the program director, to also contribute to stateside marketing and relationship building.
- Spend on hiring a part time bookkeeper. Kjerstin has been doing the books, which she acknowledges is a horrible allocation of her time. This current crisis coincided with tax filing requirements which meant she was spending many valuable hours wrestling with Quickbooks rather than making phone calls and meeting potential donors.

FORGE's own calculations indicate that some combination of these steps could bring its operational budget to \$265,000, about \$135,000 less than this year's budget. This will give them some more short term breathing room to build the capacity necessary for the long run.

4. Building the financial supply line

Like most nonprofits, FORGE can consider four main potential revenue streams:

1. Foundations
2. Government
3. Corporations
4. Individuals

Foundations: FORGE has experienced significant disappointment here. Despite devoting almost a full FTE to grant writing, it has made only minimal gains. FORGE has a hard time

matching with existing grant guidelines (which focus more on the standard relief model, not education and training). Given its difficulties matching up on paper, this suggests that personal introductions will be crucial, especially to foundations with a more flexible mindset. For Kjerstin, this means a lot of pavement pounding and networking. For the organization, though, it means it should have limited expectations from this revenue stream. Annelisa Pedersen, the grant writer on staff, should be redeployed towards the individual fundraising mentioned below.

Government: According to Kjerstin, there is little available from the United Nations given FORGE's model of focusing on development versus relief. USAID tends not to fund development projects with refugees or impose very burdensome conditions. I defer to her judgment of course, but still do wonder if there isn't some small nugget of government funding (in European countries if not US?) hiding somewhere. It would only take a small fraction of most government relief budgets to make a big difference for FORGE. It may be that more extensive networking with government figures may uncover something. One past example is a small \$15,000 grant the US Embassy now awards FORGE. Even if there isn't, I still think it is worth building relationships along these lines, if for no other reason than to influence thinking in this sector.

Corporations: This kind of funding is most viable when the issue intersects with the actual business in some meaningful way, or it is a high visibility issue in the mass culture. Sadly, no company looks at African refugees as a market and the overall issue has low cultural visibility. Apart from those factors, when it comes to corporate giving, a nonprofit really is depending on a chance connection with someone in the company. This is another reason to be doing general networking, but not to be depending on much coming via this source.

5. What FORGE needs for individual fundraising

This obviously places great weight on FORGE's ability to do individual fundraising. It is in this area above all else that FORGE needs to obtain some immediate outside expertise. The staff team (including Kjerstin) and the board lack the necessary level of strategic thinking, experience, and/or bandwidth to conceive and execute a fundraising plan at the scale required. Organizational infrastructure needs to be developed in fundamental areas like donor management software and donor cultivation practices.

While providing an individual fundraising plan is beyond the scope of my work here, I will offer some guiding thoughts on 1) the role of the board and 2) playing to FORGE's strengths.

The Board

FORGE needs to reconstitute its board. The current board has served well its purpose in the initial launch phase as it has given Kjerstin a lot of room to maneuver. But the current board is missing three types of individuals critical for fundraising:

- **C-level executive business leaders.** Donors, especially high net worth ones, tend to be executive types. They are reassured when they see that “one of their own” is involved in FORGE’s governance. This is especially true given how young the FORGE staff is (all under 25). When such a donor looks at the current roster of board and staff members, they see individuals that would be several levels down their own corporate hierarchy, a reality that does not inspire donor confidence. I also suspect that FORGE’s systematic difficulty in winning foundation grants is partly attributable to this problem. More than one foundation representative told me that the board seemed too closely held, comprised too much of family or personal friends.
- **Refugee policy expertise.** I’ve described the need for this already, but it should be emphasized that the most valuable individual donor is the high net worth individual that, for whatever reason, is already engaged in the issue. That kind of person will want to see high level expertise present, will recognize when it is there... and when it isn’t.
- **Nationally (or at least trans-regionally) networked individuals.** As mentioned, Kjerstin needs to pound the pavement. But she needs help in getting doors opened. 40% of the current board is concentrated in Kjerstin’s home in Sonoma County. That has been fine to launch FORGE, but it is far too limited of a base going forward. Board members who can open up new networks of individuals across the country are critical.

Playing to FORGE’s strengths

I have [written elsewhere](#) that FORGE has an original “fundraising soul,” one that was born in the college student world. Clearly, it has to expand beyond that world. But it can still retain a connection to that student world in a way that actually fuels its expansion.

For instance, FORGE has a cadre of individuals who in the last five years took a year off of school to work in the camps, raised money for FORGE, and are now back at school or have recently graduated. This is an army of potential evangelists for FORGE. But they need to be led and equipped more proactively than they have been.

As students or recent grads, they may not have much money themselves. But they do have networks of family, friends, and co-workers. And they have an abundance of assets that are indispensable: passion for the cause; firsthand testimonial knowledge of FORGE’s effectiveness; and demonstrated willingness to fundraise for the organization.

Historically, Kjerstin has sent out email blasts to this network with general requests for donations or general help in recruiting donors, as it has done during this recent crisis. The results have been mixed. I believe the yield would be much higher if this group was brought in earlier around a specific campaign. It would be even higher if their specific involvement could be built around supporting the particular refugee camp they served during their year abroad.

Moreover, this cadre can help build wider media attention if FORGE can conceive of a compelling campaign. The staff already has some ideas for this. One that involves a former refugee and FORGE participant doing a “reverse trek” from the camp to his original home sounds especially promising. Gaining momentum and visibility around something like that idea will only increase its chances of identifying new potential funders and getting on the screen of policy experts.

6. Conclusion: Will FORGE make it?

My answer to this question really depends on what one means by “FORGE?”

If the question is “Can FORGE *as an organization* make it?” then I must confess that I have no idea. Pathfinders do suffer a high mortality rate. FORGE faces some significant challenges. The plan outlined above requires some good execution, but truth be told, it also depends on good luck. For an organization at its life stage, a chance encounter with a wealthy individual here, a new government contact there could make all the difference.

If the question is “Can FORGE *as an approach* make it?” then I would answer, “I sure hope so.” The problem of African refugees is not going away and getting worse. Refugees are staying longer and longer in these “warehouses of pity.” And an entire generation of potential leaders in those communities is being wasted. A new route forward is desperately needed. So the paradigm of treating the camps as development opportunities where the refugees themselves lead the projects deserves a fair chance to gain wider traction. Personally, the second biggest reason I have invested my own resources is that I want that idea to be disseminated, regardless of what happens to FORGE as an institution.

Finally, if the question is “Can FORGE *as a group of individuals* make it?” then I would answer “Of course.” FORGE’s greatest strength is the passion and commitment of its people, starting with Kjerstin but extending to the US and international staff and the board. Those assets are both enduring and what economists call “fungible:” easily transferred to other contexts. And in that vein, I have told Kjerstin on numerous occasions that FORGE is most likely just the first of several causes she will spearhead over the course of her career. There are few better long term investments, in my book, than giving an obviously talented individual like Kjerstin her first shot at social entrepreneurship. This is the biggest reason I have given of myself to FORGE for this season, and have been quite glad for it.