



## **The global development lowdown at SXSW**

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Every year, professionals across sectors gather in Austin, Texas, for South by Southwest, a “destination for discovery” for music, film and technology.

“South by Southwest, in our best moments, is about using technology, using creativity, using innovation to help people out who need help, to help level the playing field between the haves and have nots,” Hugh Forrest, chief programming officer for SXSW, said at the Community Service Awards Monday.

The ceremony — celebrating technology in service of humanity — draws a smaller crowd than many of the talks, concerts and parties sprinkled around town but brings the conference “back to its roots,” says Forrest.

DeVex was on the scene at SXSW to learn how emerging tech trends will impact the work of the global development community. Here are our top takeaways.

*“I’m gratified that there is so much interest in trying to make the internet useful for people. I’m almost okay with whatever motivation it is that gets more internet out there, on the premise that once it gets there, people will figure out ways to use it that may not have been in the minds of people who put internet in place.”*

— **Vint Cerf, chief internet evangelist at Google**

**Complex problems demand a combination of perspectives.**

A key strength of SXSW is bringing together power players from disparate backgrounds who might not otherwise meet one another. Often some of the best meetings happen over breakfast tacos, at brand takeovers and pop up events, and at happy hours.

Tipped off to a meetup for the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, Robert Opp, director of innovation and change management at the World Food Programme, headed from the SXSW Social Good Hub to the Austin Convention Center — the center of the action for a conference that spans much of downtown.

There, Opp spoke with the IEEE President Karen Bartleson about how their 430,000 members around the world might aid WFP projects in developing countries where it's sometimes challenging to find technical expertise. Then Opp bumped into Vint Cerf, the chief internet evangelist at Google and one of the fathers of the internet. Opp gave him a rundown on his efforts, including the World Food Programme Innovation Accelerator, and discussed opportunities to work together on the challenge of hunger.

“The world is changing and we need to change. Every single industry is being disrupted. The U.N. is no different,” Opp told Devex. “If the U.N. wants to stay relevant to its mandate, which is supporting governments and people of the world, we either disrupt ourselves and stay relevant or let go and let someone else do it.”

Chef José Andrés speaks with Devex following his session on clean cookstoves.

Elsewhere in Austin, Blair Glencorse, founder and executive director of the Accountability Lab, found himself speaking with an Emmy Award nominated rapper, a leader in the advertising industry, a serial tech entrepreneur, and the head of a foundation at SXSW.

SXSW is not the standard international development conference, and that is exactly the point, he told Devex. He said the experience offered new insights on ways to connect with audiences in order to create change, inspiration and opportunities for collaboration (not to mention fun).

"The value of SXSW for those working in international development is the mix of creatives, media experts and artists that you're able to meet," said Glencorse, whose organization was a SXSW Community Service Award honoree. “That diversity of approaches allows you to think about programming through a different lens and reimagine how to engage communities.”

David Shoultz, program leader for drug development at PATH in Seattle, spent just one night at home between a weeklong trip to Bangladesh and his appearance on a panel at SXSW called Technology Solutions in International Development.

“This is not really my natural habitat. I’m not a big arts and culture festival kind of guy. But this is critically important,” he told Devex. “If we are going to be successful by 2030 then we need to really expand the group of people and types of organizations working on this, and it can’t be the same players, just like it’s not the same technology.”

San Jose Mayor Sam Liccardo, at SXSW with the U.S. Conference on Mayors, discusses his smart city strategy.

### **Consider how technology impacts humans.**

In a session called “DARK DAYS: AI and the Rise of Fascism,” Kate Crawford, who studies the social implications of technologies like artificial intelligence at Microsoft Research, explored ways to protect communities from the potential applications of autonomous technologies for surveillance, harassment or deportation.

“The technology is exciting,” said Monique Morrow, a technology strategist who spent much of her career on Cisco. She now works with the IEEE and spoke on blockchain as part of IEEE’s Tech for Humanity series at SXSW. “On the other hand, who is watching whom?”

She was in the audience for DARK DAYS as well as a number of other sessions on the risks and rewards of technology.

“If we are not careful, we will set ourselves up for tremendous abuse,” she said.

Just as drivers need to get licenses in order to get behind the wheel, technologists need to ask what responsibility looks like for the products and services they develop, she said. Many of the SXSW sessions focused on the risks, as well as the rewards, that come with technology. Morrow said her call to action for the technology community — and the global development community — is to design responsibility into technology so that it is unbiased.

From the halls of SXSW, here are takeaways from global development professionals on Facebook Live.

One of the themes that cut across SXSW sessions this year was job displacement, from the fast paced growth of the gig economy, in which people take on part-time jobs instead of full-time work, to the risk of the rise of robots.

For example, Matt Rendall of OTTO Motors, the self-driving truck company that was acquired by Uber, led a session yesterday called “Robots vs Jobs: Technological Displacement is Here.” The French Digital Council, which was commissioned by the French government to consider the impact of AI on jobs, was part of a panel on that topic. And Devex moderated a session on Universal Basic Income with Michael Faye — co-founder of GiveDirectly, who described his team’s UBI pilot in Kenya — and Mike Tanner, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, who has said that while UBI sounds good in theory, it breaks down in implementation — but he supports efforts like these to bring evidence to the debate.

Robots were mixing and serving drinks and even speaking at sessions at SXSW. But as they start to take on ever more human-like tasks, important questions come up, such as what is the future of work? Forums like SXSW bring development professionals and technology professionals alike together to discuss potential responses to the accelerating automation of jobs.

## **Make “social good” mainstream.**

Global development professionals who make the trip to Austin have a lot to gain, but plenty to contribute, including a reminder of the complexity of the problems many of the SXSW attendees were drawn toward solving.

*“I run the foundation like I do a business. We look at return on investment, because people think that corporations have unlimited money to put into philanthropy and that's just not the case.”*

— **Michele Sullivan, president of the Caterpillar Foundation**

“As international development practitioners, we should be making connections, identifying opportunities, incubating new ideas, and testing concepts that ultimately improve people's lives and solve the world's toughest challenges,” said Jennifer Dahnke, deputy director for learning at QED Group, an international consulting firm in Washington, D.C.

Technology is not a solution in and of itself, but can be a part of the solution if it is based in human needs, responding to critical challenges, and rooted in context, data, and experience, she said, following a session called “Disrupting Global Hunger: Moonshots for Humanity.”

Following the session, she organized her notes, sheets of white paper with every corner filled with insights. She shared a few highlights with Devex.

***“Farmers in Kenya are more connected now than the US President was 15 years ago.” – From “Let’s Map: Build and Inspire a Future We All Want to Live In”***

***“Without networks, transformative change is nearly impossible” – From “Enabling Transformative Change Across Continents”***

***“The goal of Artificial Intelligence is to make better decisions. Technology should take the mundane out of people's lives and allow us to focus on higher endeavors.” – From “Augmented Intelligence: The Next-Gen AI”***

***“We are not solving a food problem, we're solving a human problem.” – From “Seeds of Disruption: The Future of Protein”***

And here are some highlights from Devex’s notebook:

In “Payments Gone Viral: The Rise of Social Commerce,” Kahina Van Dyke, global director of commerce and payment partnerships at Facebook, spoke about the connection between digital inclusion and financial inclusion, the role of identity, and the public private partnership opportunities with technology companies, governments, and development organizations.

When Padmasree Warrior, CEO of NIO US, took the stage to discuss “Uncovering Autonomy’s Blind Spot,” she shared details with the audience about Eve — a concept driverless, electric car — one of many products unveiled at SXSW.

But as Warrior said in a follow-up interview with Devex held inside what felt like a living room on wheels, seemingly futuristic technologies are already impacting developing countries, and smart city plans must account for the impact of driverless technology.

“Autonomous vehicles will have a huge impact on urban planning,” she said. “We don’t need parking structures. The car can go park itself outside the city and we don’t need to waste prime real estate.”

One of the challenges for autonomous vehicles in emerging market economies, beyond cost, is that people do not tend to follow rules on the highways, which demands more advanced AI to deal with this unpredictability, she said. But as the world urbanizes, there is an opportunity to design new cities in developing countries, and they have to be planned with emerging technologies in mind, she explained. For example, she talked about the work she did at Cisco, where she was formerly the chief technology officer, to develop a new smart city in India, where she is from.

Several people who spoke with Devex agreed the talks that were framed as social impact or social good tended to draw a smaller crowd, even though speakers at many of the most popular sessions on technology did speak about the social implications of these developments.

Perhaps the better way to attract technology experts and business leaders to the Sustainable Development Goals is to frame these areas as engineering problems or business opportunities with social implications, attendees told Devex.

“I guess just don’t call it social good,” said Robert Holzer, CEO Of Matter Unlimited, a creative agency focused on social impact, who organized a panel called “Virtual Reality: A Tool for Creating Global Policy Change?” He noted, “we talk about purpose as white space business opportunity. We’re not saying ‘Do this because it’s the right thing to do.’ A lot of this stuff started with reputation management and corporate social responsibility, but we’re saying it’s an opportunity for you to identify innovation within your business.”

While the interactive track of SXSW officially wrapped up yesterday, this conference is about the convergence of technology, music, and film, so expect plenty of tweets that might inform your work around the #SXSW hashtag in the days ahead.