Imagine the Western Cape’s R64 million health budget under-spend (2010/2011) being redirected into one tightly knit, strategic unit of social entrepreneurs, NGOs and public sector specialists tasked with growing primary healthcare capacity in burgeoning underserved urban areas.

Now picture that being replicated across the country where a quick glance at under-spending in other far less efficient provinces seems to render the Western Cape’s apparent incapacity (they treated 15.8 million people at primary healthcare clinics the previous financial year, boasting the country’s highest TB cure rate at 79.4%), virtually insignificant. That’s the kind of ‘out the box’ thinking that resulted in long-time social change/empowerment volunteer, Dr Keith Wimble, becoming one of two finalists to represent South Africa in Vodafone’s Graham Maher ‘Change the world’ volunteerism award. The prize would have netted R1.2 million for a specialist team with finely tuned skill-sets. The innovative concept to open partnerships to review and develop variations on a “tell” meeting [i.e. being told what to do] was organised by an MEC that has not been told. ‘I had never attended a meeting like this,’ says the meeting was a ‘revelation’ to him. ‘I smiled for the rest of the day,’ said Wimble, a successful Pietermaritzburg entrepreneur who downscaled his lucrative businesses to enable him to devote his life to humanitarian healthcare.

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Nurture grassroots human capital and save lives – global award finalist

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South Africa lost its way on primary health care

‘It was a tome of note on how hospital management was going to be rolled out. But one comment stuck in my mind which sums it all up and that was this: “No action without permission”. Now that’s exactly the issue. Unless you give those at the bottom the authority to make decisions it just doesn’t work … successful big corporations all do this,’ he added. Wimble said that in his first few years at Valley Trust (from 1994 onwards) ‘everybody in the health department’ attended workshops on primary healthcare. ‘Today if you ask nurses about primary healthcare they can’t tell you because HIV came along and the focus shifted to that and integrated management of childhood illnesses.’ The great irony and tragedy was that pioneers of COPHC (early 1950s), Drs Sydney and Emilie Kark at Pholela Mission in KwaZulu-Natal and Valley Trust founder, Dr Halley Stott, were largely ignored until now. ‘Within a decade of setting up a clinic at Botha’s Hill on the boundary between black and white South Africa, Stott had won the trust of locals and reduced infant mortality from 164 to 22 per 1 000.

He did some very basic things; taught the community about organic agriculture, focused on food preparation and a balanced diet and paid attention to mother and child issues such as long-term breast feeding and immunisation – that’s how simple it was,’ Wimble says, shaking his head ruefully at the modern tendency to ‘chase CAT scans and telemedicine’.

When Vodacom South Africa advertised for volunteers in their local ‘Change the world’ project, he had just completed setting up a major ARV programme at the Catholic Centocow Mission Hospital near Isopo in KwaZulu-Natal while raising over R1 million for soccer fields and a tennis court.

Wimble has pledged the next R120 000 to Centocow as well. ‘I gave Father Ignatius at Centocow Mission my word, so the posting down to Cape Town, 1 000 km from home, became part of that commitment – even though I’d never worked in a township shack environment before,’ he adds.

Sponsored volunteerism requires sacrifice; the longer the tune lasts, the longer you pay the piper. However, one upside to Wimble’s coming second is that he won’t have to spend another year working with his sponsor-designated NGO, something Kotze will be contractually bound to if she goes on to win the Graham Maher Award. ‘I have a home and business in Hilton, so winning had a bit of a sting in the tail, though it would have been a huge honour and benefit for the people I’m working with,’ he says with a stoicism born of constantly witnessing people surviving intense hardship.

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