

# “Although our planetary resources may be finite, the potential to share is unlimited.”

*Great things can happen with a bit of positive thinking – and a helping hand from others. Sharing economy ambassador Benita Matofska talks to Clare Gogerty*

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hen I get up in the morning, I ask myself ‘What can I share today?’” Benita Matofska says, as she turfs Buster, her

Cairn terrier, off the sofa in her Brighton home, then picks him up. “It could be something as simple and as small as smiling at a neighbour. It doesn’t have to involve huge numbers of people.”

Sharing, in its multifarious forms, is central to Benita’s life and work, and she is on a mission to make it part of ours, too. Her recent book, *Generation Share*, which she co-produced with photographer Sophie Sheinwald, has 200 inspirational stories of ‘change-makers’ who are building a better world. Each is an example of the sharing economy, which was born out of the recession in 2009 and is, says Benita, “a system to live by. Whereby we care for the people and the planet by sharing available resources.”

These initiatives include the practical – the Lena Fashion Library in Amsterdam, which lends clothes for a monthly subscription; the educational – Aarti Naik’s slum school for girls in Mumbai; and the digital – the food-sharing app Olio. There are plenty of others all over the world, of different sizes and purposes, each an uplifting tale of what is possible when we learn to share. It is a movement that is growing fast.

“The sharing economy was born out of the global recession and financial crisis of 2009,” Benita says. “It’s

about saying that although our planetary resources may be finite, the potential to share is unlimited. There has been a huge shift in understanding that consumption has brought about planetary destruction. On a basic level, it means not owning things but having access to them. When I started this work, I told myself that I wasn’t going to buy new things any more. There is enough stuff in the world already.”

Evidence of the success of this approach is all around her in the light, stylish home she shares with husband Lee and children Maia and Sol. The living room is filled with art by friends, rugs woven from recycled material and cleverly sourced finds from local junk shops. “I like mid-century style,” she explains simply, “so I buy old furniture.” The tailored trousers and colourful top she is wearing have also “had another life”. “Even Buster, a rescue dog who has had two previous owners, can be said to be recycled,” she says with a laugh.

Benita believes that whereas previous generations felt the need to own things as a form of security, a new generation, motivated by the importance of doing more with less, is preferring to share. This manifests in various ways, including co-owning a bike or reducing food waste. It’s an approach that is kinder both to the planet and to ourselves.

Sharing is also, she stresses, far from a ‘fluffy’ concept – it has the potential to save lives. “Last year in the UK alone, 650 million meals-worth of food was thrown into landfill. In the UK, 8.6 million people live



in food poverty,” she says with the fervour of the impassioned speaker and change-maker that she is. “We’ve got enough food to feed everybody. And we can do that by sharing.”

#### **PROMPTED BY AN EPIPHANY**

The potential benefits of sharing came to Benita in a flash when she attended the One Young World congress (a global forum for young leaders) in 2010. Backstage with the likes of Desmond Tutu and Bob Geldof “I had an epiphany,” she says. “I realised that what the world suffered from was a shortage of sharing.”

Twenty years of radio news reporting and TV documentary-making had led her to this momentous

career moment. “I went into the world of television because I wanted to do some good in the world,” she says. “I thought that journalism was about exposing the bad stuff.”

Although her early career allowed her to do this – she reported on subjects including FGM and child development – increasingly she found it difficult to get anything commissioned that had a positive narrative. “I was tired of being told that my ideas were ‘too worthy’. The final straw came when I was asked to find an 11-year-old dad for a programme about teen pregnancy. I said it was completely irresponsible, sent an email, and left. I wanted to focus on what is right with the world, not what is wrong with it. »





## HOW TO BE A CHANGE-MAKER BY BENITA

### 1 Be brave.

There may be resistance and bureaucracy to overcome. It can be difficult to get things started, but it's worth persisting. I never take no for an answer.

### 2 Be adaptable.

Circumstances may change and you may have to alter your vision.

### 3 Keep positive.

Even when things look impossible, there is always a way.

### 4 Be future-facing.

All the change-makers in the book think about the long term. Don't think in terms of a quick fix. Think "Where is this going to take us?"

### 5 Share with others.

Collaborate. Change-making isn't about doing something just for yourself, it's about others, too.



That's how we unleash the potential to share and enable people to change."

Knowing that she wanted out of television and in to something in the charity sector, she applied for jobs but was puzzled when she didn't get any interviews. A one-day course called Making the Leap propelled her in the right direction. "I met an amazing woman called Vanessa Johnson-Burgess [a specialist in inspirational training], who put the job description for Head of Global Entrepreneurship for Enterprise UK in front of me. I applied for the post and got it. It was the start of my journey into this world."

### SHARING IS FOR EVERYONE

Rather than reluctantly promoting the media's negative view of the world, Benita was able to big-up the positive things she had seen all around her. "Headlines are always negative," she says, "but when you look at what is really happening – contrary to what you read when you pick up almost any publication,

*"Headlines are always negative but there are swathes of extraordinary people doing extraordinary things"*

both online and in print – you realise that there are in fact swathes of extraordinary people doing extraordinary things."

Her life became about encouraging people to share, collaborate and unleash their potential as change-makers. To spread the word and to benefit more people, she founded The People Who Share ([thepeoplewhoshare.com](http://thepeoplewhoshare.com)). The charity runs an annual Global Sharing Week, a mass engagement campaign celebrating the sharing economy, which held 540 events during one week in June this year. The People Who Share website also includes a Share Guide: a useful international directory of communities,





networks and like-minded folk, many of whom appear in 'Generation Share'.

One such example is right on Benita's doorstep in Brighton. HISBE (How It Should Be) is a 'rebel' supermarket founded by Ruth Ainslow and Jack Simmonds, which is all about keeping profits in the community and in the hands of producers. Out of every pound spent in the shop, 68p goes to the supplier, compared to 9p in conventional supermarkets. "HISBE shows that it is possible to have models that work commercially but which also create social and environmental benefits," says Benita. "That's what

## A LIFE SHARED

### The Benita Matofska CV

- 1967** Born in Leeds
- 1989-90** Reports for the BBC; produces pieces for *Woman's Hour*, *You and Yours* and *Newsbeat* before travelling and collecting stories
- 1995** Moves to New York with her boyfriend. Establishes TV Company *Suitcase Productions*
- 1998** Marries above boyfriend, Lee Dyer, in Cornwall
- 2003** Daughter, Maia, born; son, Sol, born the following year
- 2003** Moves back to the UK
- 2008** Disillusioned with TV, becomes Head of Global Entrepreneurship for Enterprise UK
- 2010** At One Young World Congress, the idea for The People Who Share is born
- 2011** Organises Crowdfare in Brighton. Sets up National Sharing Day.
- 2015** Global Sharing Day becomes Global Sharing Week
- 2016-19** Travels, meeting change-makers for Generation Share

Amsterdam's Lena Fashion Library (above), and Aarti Naik, with mum Pushpa, who set up Mumbai's Sakhi School for Girls Education. Opposite: photographer Sophie Sheinwald and Benita tell the story of Inir Pinheiro, founder of Grassroutes, which focuses on community-based tourism

the sharing economy is all about. As a society, we have focused on commercial value at the expense of the social and environmental."

## THE START OF SOMETHING BIG

True to her principles, the costs of travel incurred when researching Generation Share were crowd-funded, the book is printed on recycled paper and published by 'publishers with a purpose', Policy Press, a non-profit imprint of Bristol University Press. It is not an academic tome but a book to dip into, she suggests, "when you have had a horrendous day at work and want to be cheered up. I wanted to create something beautiful that represented the spirit of sharing that was really accessible." It is, she says, more than a book. It is the next stage in building a community of sharers. "We've been through an industrial revolution, we're going through a digital revolution, and I believe we're going to go through a sharing revolution. After all, to share is to be human." S