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Breaking the Cycle of Poverty through Holistic Sustainable Community Development

by Tom Bassford
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Significant Matters, Inc. is a Christian-based, not-for-profit organization with a mission to connect those who want to help with those who want help. We help individuals and organizations create lasting partnerships built upon genuine relationships that transcend cultural and socio-economic borders in order to bring spiritual, social, physical and economic renewal to people and communities around the corner and around the world. Our vision is to see lives changed and communities transformed through the efforts of individuals and organizations working together to create holistic, sustainable change.

Clearly, the resources necessary to accomplish all that the Scriptures call us to do in our world already exist. The issue is not more resources but rather more individuals and ministries working together to steward those resources in strategic and sustainable ways. Although we work with individuals and organizations outside the specific realm of community development our passion lies therein. What follows is a basic rationale for the collaborative work we do around holistic, sustainable community development as a model for helping people and communities break the cycle of poverty.

Values

Following are the core values that guide us in our decisions about participation in community development initiatives.

Indigenous Leaders: We value indigenous leaders already invested and working in the community and the necessary work to identify them as the first step and the primary channel through which we will either develop or participate in a holistic, sustainable community development effort.

Community Assets: We value the assets that already exist within a community and the necessary work to identify those assets as a preliminary and ongoing process. This is known as *Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD)* and it “considers local assets as the primary building blocks of sustainable community development. Building on the skills of local residents, the power of local associations, and the supportive functions of local institutions, asset-based community development draws upon existing community strengths to build stronger, more sustainable communities for the future.” (The Asset-Based Community Development Institute, Northwestern University).

Holistic Model: We value a model of community development that addresses social, spiritual, physical and economic needs as all necessary components. As part of this value we hold that the work of integrating efforts across all four areas and facilitating collaboration with other indigenous groups within the community is necessary work and must be the passion and responsibility of some indigenous leader.



The model we use at Significant Matters looks like this.....

A Model for Holistic, Sustainable Community Development

Values continued...

Accountability: We value accountability in all that we do together. As part of that accountability we will practice transparency in all our financial dealings as well as evaluation and reporting on goals.

Sustainable Approach: We value an approach that has various forms of economic development and a plan that attempts over time to make the community development project self-sustaining. Toward that end the next three values have to do with the mobilization of both human and financial resources as well as technology.

Patient Capital – A kind of “benevolent investment” that is neither traditional charity nor traditional investment but a cross between the two that seeks sustainable change through *patient, long-term* investing of non-indigenous resources. This value is without a doubt the hardest value for those from the “West” to grasp. Whether we are investing human resources (time and talent) or financial resources (treasure) we are used to quarterly timelines and yearly ROI expectations that simply do not work in the context of the cycle of poverty.

The idea of “patient capital” was actually coined by Jacquelin Novogratz, founder and CEO of Acumen Fund, a nonprofit venture capital firm for the poor that invests in sustainable enterprises. She writes, “If it were easy (to do economic development among) the poor, patient capital would not be necessary. It’s not easy. Social entrepreneurs focused on serving low-income markets work against all odds of success, facing enormous individual and institutional challenges. The only chance to overcome these hurdles is to combine an extraordinary entrepreneur with the kind of support that neither traditional investors nor traditional charities can provide.” Novogratz, J. *The Blue Sweater*. New York: Rodale Inc, 2009

Investing in Innovation and Entrepreneurs: We value investing in innovation and entrepreneurs because sustainable change always comes from those two sources. No one has the answer to holistic, sustainable community development which is why it is critical to find and invest in those indigenous entrepreneurs who possess the moral leadership to create for the good of others and who can see a problem and won’t stop working on it until it is solved.

Redemptive Entanglement: We value deepening the bonds between *those who want to help and those who want help* and the necessary work it takes to do so. We believe that the kind of sustainable change we are focused on only happens when both those who help and those who are helped see their work together not so much as a transaction bound by timelines but as a relationship worthy of deep sacrifice, careful listening, hard work and creative problem-solving. Indeed, I’m convinced that redemptive entanglement is the salient ingredient in any relationship or circumstance that needs growth, nurturing or change. Redemptive Entanglement is both a value and a strategy.

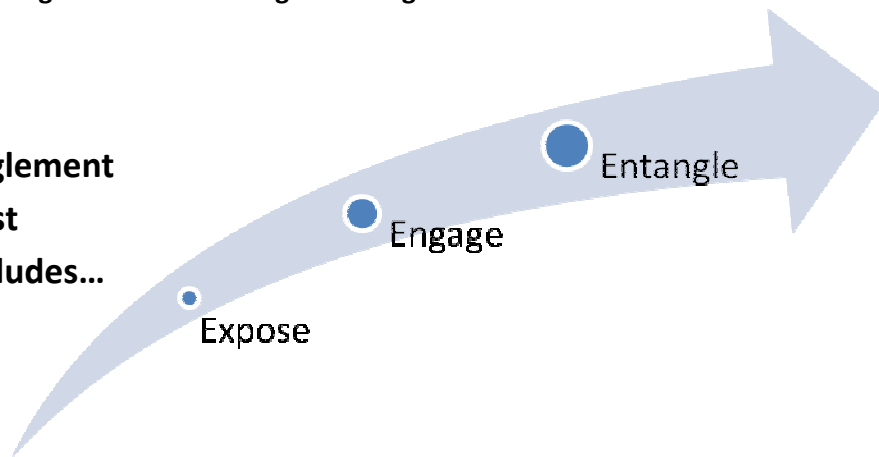
Strategies:

There are two overriding strategies that we embrace in our model of Holistic, Sustainable Community Development. One is a strategy for **Mobilizing Non-Indigenous Resources** and the other is a strategy for **Organizing Indigenous Resources**.

It’s important to remember that resources exist on both sides of the equation. One of the fallacies and oft time’s hurtful assumptions is that those with financial means and expertise bring the real “resources” necessary to effect change. While it may be true that non-indigenous resources are helpful and possibly even necessary they are by no means the only resources nor the most important. Every community, no matter how depressed or broken has its own resources of leaders, cultural understanding, entrepreneurs, social capital, highly developed networks, political structures and even economic markets. An integrated two-fold strategy to mobilize and educate non-indigenous resources and provide a framework for organizing indigenous resources is critical.

Strategy 1 - Redemptive Entanglement - Mobilizing Non-Indigenous Resources

Redemptive Entanglement is a process for most individuals that includes...



Our strategy to mobilize non-indigenous resources has been to develop long-term partnerships at the organizational/leader level with groups, initiatives or even individuals that align with our mission, vision and values. The partnership is meant to reflect the value of redemptive entanglement at the organizational/leadership level. In other words, there is a commitment at the highest level of deep sacrifice, careful listening, hard work and creative problem-solving. Without this commitment it's impossible to model for individuals what redemptive entanglement looks like.

From there we work through short-term projects and ongoing opportunities as a way to create initial awareness, develop relationships and move a person toward a personal commitment of serving out of a sense of redemptive entanglement. We make sure that our partnerships are all based in holistic, sustainable models of community development so as to provide the widest range of possibilities for the widest range of interests and competencies among our volunteers. We then offer opportunities that mirror the process we are trying to take a person through; **expose, engage** and **entangle**.

We try to help build bridges between both people and ministries in order to create collaborative partnerships. Across those bridges we are able to expose people to the needs of others in a face to face, relational way. We give them an opportunity to meaningfully engage with the people and needs that they experience. Then we encourage them to find ways to become redemptively entangled with long-term solutions.

Strategy 2 - Integrated Sector Approach - Organizing Indigenous Resources

The strategy for how we organize the actual community development work that we get involved in can be summed up as an integrated sector approach that builds around the core values stated earlier. It includes two concepts that have not been mentioned so far:

Strategic Result Areas (SRA's) – A set of essential sectors within community life which are both imperative and catalytic for healthy and sustainable community life. We have developed a framework around four sectors that we think represent the primary and catalytic sectors that need to be addressed to create holistic, sustainable communities. The list is broad enough to be adaptable to specific needs/issues across a wide range of communities and yet narrow enough to identify the core sectors necessary for healthy sustainable community life in most communities world-wide. They are:

- Indigenous Leaders & Community Assets
- Health & Wellness (we include spiritual as well as physical in this sector)
- Child Care & Education (all the various needs that can be assessed to children in poverty including education)
- Economic Development (the ability to earn a living and provide for your family opportunities to improve life)

Intentional Integration – A central assumption to the Integrated Sector Approach is the idea that someone has to be about the work of intentionally identifying, starting and integrating efforts in all four of the SRA's for the sake of accelerating progress and thwarting duplication. There are two other approaches that some groups use:

- Best Practices Unintegrated Model – An approach to community development that seeks to invest in “Best Practices” among individual SRA's but not in the work of necessary integration among the SRA's.
- The Seminal Sector Model – An approach to community development that tries to identify the one sector that will be the catalyst for change in all other sectors through a trickle-down effect.

The evidence of experience and research both suggest that these two strategies are lacking precisely because they fail to see and resource the necessary work of integration.

Final Thoughts

Turn-key: We are not suggesting that Holistic Sustainable Community Development is a turn-key operation and we have the blueprint. We are suggesting that there are some guiding principles and a strategic process that can be used to help guide the process.

Holistic and the work of integration: We are also suggesting that the work of integrating both indigenous and non-indigenous resources into a cohesive plan must be a part of someone's responsibility. “The holistic approach is nothing more than a conscious effort to place emphasis on the functional relationships among the parts and the whole. It does not require dealing with everything all the time. Dealing with any aspect related to community systems is done in a way that keeps in mind the whole and other parts. Even before particulars are known, the expectation is that each part or aspect will operate with reciprocal relationships. The holistic approach involves relational thought. Instead of thinking about each element by itself, each is envisioned in the context of a totality (Ogilvy, J. *Many Dimensional Man*. New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1979).

All or none: It's important to understand that Holistic Sustainable Community Development can be done across a range of independent organization. We are not suggesting that this has to all be done by one single organization with centralized control although it could. There are three basic ways to approach this:

- We do it all – centralized control
- We do it together with other entities – A group of best practices working together - co-operative control
- We do it with outsourcing – centralized control w/outourcing of certain SRA's

Flexible and dynamic: No one has the secret formula on this subject. James B Cook with the Department of Community Development at the University of Missouri wrote, “With the variety in communities, with the variations in circumstances from place to place and time to time, and with the rapid changes going on in the total environment, community development theory has to be dynamic by necessity...allowing the consequences of practice to inform theory...” (Community Development Theory, October 1994).