

What I Have Learnt About Community Development

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“You ask me ‘what is the most important thing?’ And I will tell you. It is People... People... People...” *Maori Proverb*

After more than ten years living with Servants among the urban poor in Cambodia, and praying and working to see the lives of the poor and their communities transformed, I believe I have learnt some key lessons about ‘development’, the most important of which is this:

Good plans follow good people, and good money follows good people with good plans.

What I mean by that is this: when we come into a situation of great need and want to see deep and abiding change for the better, the first thing we should do is seek good people. A few good men and a few good women. In those few (maybe only one or two) lie the seeds of change and renewal. Maybe this is what Jesus is talking about when he commands the disciples to “search for some worthy person” (Matthew 10:11) as they launch out into mission.

By good people, I don't mean 'highly moral' people. I mean those whose hearts are moved by the things that move God (sickness, hunger, suffering, death, violence, abuse, addictions etc), who love those around them, and who are prepared to get their hands dirty and do something about it. People of compassion and action. People who are already trying to help those in need.

Gather together with those people. Help nurture them and the mustard seeds of goodness and compassion that are within them. Pray together – that God’s kingdom might begin to come in this place too (Matthew 6:10). Encourage them to dream their dreams, for almost certainly those dreams come from God. These will be ‘kingdom dreams’: dreams of healing, new-life, and the overcoming of evil (Matthew 10:8). Start to plan and plot together how you could let God’s compassion flow through you to make a difference in this place. Dream a dream and build a team. Good plans will emerge, plans which are owned by local people and earthed in the local situation.

I think this is what Filipino theologian/activist Melba Maggay means when she urges us to 'nurture a strategic minority': *"Students of social change tell us that it is better to aim at consensus within a strategic minority rather than to waste time and breath at soliciting the conformity of the majority. Since a movement for change involves vision and sacrifice it is not possible to start with the many. Very few people can see ten steps ahead of them. Most are too enclosed in the realities of the present to be able to imagine an alternative future. It takes a lot of imagination to believe that with the coming of Christ, a new order has come into being."* (Melba Maggay, *Survival Strategies*, p 7).

Once good people have come together and made good plans – plans that have flowed from the heart of God, moved by the brokenness of people’s pain and need – all the necessary resources will follow. Many will be found within this group itself. They may have been long buried and ignored, but they will be emerging now as people pray, dream, and share about their experiences and previous efforts. But if more resources are needed, these also will come. The community itself will see what is happening, and resources buried in it will start to emerge. If even more resources are required, these too will come. If God is involved in the process, he will provide what is needed, no matter how much that may be. I believe this strategy holds true whether we be trying foster community development, initiate a public health program, plant a church or whatever.

Nothing I've said so far here sounds particularly startling does it? In fact, it sounds perfectly reasonable, perhaps even obvious. Yet the majority of 'Development' (and even 'Mission') Organizations tend to work completely the other way around from the process I'm describing here (and the bigger they are, the more true this is). First they assemble their money – often tons of it – to back up their master plan, their awesome strategy that will 'blow those communities problems clean away'. Then they come, attract and recruit 'highly qualified staff' with their big pay rolls, and train them to implement the master plan. Usually the results are disappointing, and well below what was hoped for given the amount of money spent. Many big organizations try to 'do development' (or 'do mission') this way: 1. Assemble good money and 2. Come up with a good plan. 3. Attract good people (staff).

But it's all back to front.

Real community development, and real kingdom mission happens the other way around, from the bottom-up. 1. First we find good people. 2. Then we come up with a good plan together (call it a program if you must). 3. And then whatever resources are needed will follow.

Good money follows good people with good plans. It always does.

For incarnational missions like Servants living and ministering with the poor, this is our natural way of working. By living at the local neighbourhood level, we are in a great position to 'seek out those worthy people' that Jesus was talking about, those gems that bigger groups probably won't ever notice. In fact we may struggle to notice them at first too – they will usually be poor, uneducated and needy themselves (1 Corinthians 1:26-28) – but we must to ask God for the eyes to see them, and for the providential circumstances in which to meet them. It takes time and patience to develop these kind of eyes, eyes that can look beyond broken, rough exteriors and see the treasure buried there. Indeed, it takes years. And this presents a great problem for both 'short term missions', and for 'development agencies' who so often work on three year funding cycles (meaning they will fund a project for up to three years, and then pull the plug if it's not 'successful'). To use a horticultural metaphor for a moment, three years might be long enough to grow flowers or shrubs, but it's not long enough to grow trees, and growing trees is what we are after in genuine community development. Flowers look pretty, but its surface level stuff. What the poor need are not cosmetic changes, but deeply rooted local agents of transformation living among them, those who bear the kind of fruit that reproduces over and over (check out the *oaks of righteousness* mentioned in Isaiah 61:1-4, and where they have come from). A ten year time frame would be much more realistic if we want to be a part of genuine community development.

This patient, incarnational approach to development requires us to be prayerful and attentive in all that we do, looking to see where God is at work in our communities and in the lives of those around us. As we live our lives for Christ and seek to see his kingdom come in our communities, we will be a watchful people, a listening people, a waiting people. Christ calls us not so much to be leaders as to be followers and joiners – those who hear where the Spirit is already going and follow; those who see what the Spirit is already doing and join in. We are called to be waiters. We are called to be servants.

KRJ, February 2005.