Looking Beyond Despair: Creating Home-Grown Solutions through Contextualized Development Approaches

DECEMBER 5, 2018

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~ This essay is an excerpt of a longer thesis submitted for a Master's degree in International Community and Development; the longer paper is available on ProQuest Theses and Dissertations. ~

Toward the Creation of a New Model

"How can I help?" a friend desperately inquired. I could feel the deep compassion he had, but he did not know how to solve the problem before his eyes. For the first time, my friend was experiencing the disheartening circumstances of the people living in internally displaced people's camps during the civil war in northern Uganda. This is not the only time I have been asked this question; I quickly recollected the many instances I have seen the expression of helplessness in my Western friends. At times their concerns and good intentions are expressed through the many endeavors to help poor communities. Countless well-meaning people want to make a change but do not know how. Personally, I am still in search of the best way to help those in need. My quest for answers also led me to be involved in this International Community Development (ICD) program. Now, I see the world more clearly, and I have gained a deep insight and acquired useful tools and ideas to approach the problem of poverty. In this section, I have incorporated my passion and the lessons I have learned in this program in my response to the aforementioned question. In addition, I have drawn from the last two sections to provide a contextualized model for enriching and equipping the local population to take charge of the transformation process.

The task of transformation requires the contribution of the indigenous population because sustainability depends on their participation. The model I proposed for this study is twofold. The first part of the model is providing indigenous people with education and skills training. As the world changes, it is important not to leave others behind or cut them off from civilization. Impoverished people need information, skills, and opportunities, not more aid. To address this deficiency, I propose a village-based imagination center, providing the opportunity for the poor to envisage possibilities and capabilities to build their dreams. Specifically, the focus of this project a contextualized business education to the illiterate population. The details of this training initiative are provided in Appendix I. The poor need entrepreneurial skills to become business savvy within their own local means, which would be achieved by engaging them in economic activities that are asset-based. According to Ssewamala et al., "[t]he asset-based approach to development… enable[s] individuals and local communities to take action to improve their life situation" (434). As described in the model found in Appendix I, local entrepreneurial training provides a valuable business education that utilizes local resources and networks.

A second aspect of empowering the poor involves providing access to micro-credit facilities. After acquiring business skills, many people fail to make the next move because of lack of capital. The chances are limited for the poor and illiterate population to access loans from formal financial institutions due to lack of collateral and steady income. Locally based credit facilities are needed (e.g., the Bangladesh Grameen Bank of Mohamed Yunus) to provide micro-credit loans at low-interest rates and without demands for collateral.

Changing the counter-productive mindset

As part of the process of reducing poverty, it is important to change the mindsets and attitudes of people in poor communities that hinder their advancement. When I was a boy, my father told a hypothetical story of a wild animal caught in a cage. According to the story, the caged animal slammed its body against the walls, only to bleed and bruise, its hopes of escape shattered. Several months later, the cage was dismantled, but the animal's fear of pain kept it from leaving the enclosure. This story alludes to the mindsets of some people in poor communities, especially in Uganda where this study was based. The fatigue from failed attempts to alleviate poverty still looms large in the country, which has a profound effect on the thinking process of many people.

Most scholars agree that the problem of poverty in Africa is rooted in the colonial and imperialist tendencies that have invaded the continent from the 1800s to the present. A common thread in the history of Africa shows that the spirit of innovation was crushed by imperialist governments from so-called civilized countries. The establishment of the Colonial Era in the late 1800s did more harm than good, turning Africans into slaves and strangers in their own land. Furthermore, colonialism led to a partitioning of the continent that was naïve of ethnic boundaries, resulting in political, geographical, cultural, and economic chaos that affect the continent to this day. During the cruel western hegemony, people were treated inhumanely for centuries. Any African who resisted the system was brutally punished and psychologically tortured. Today, African leaders that take a stand to defend the economic and political rights of their sovereign nations are often threatened by some Westernpowers.

The colonial era and the subsequent new-colonization tendencies continue to destroy the thought process of many Africans and stifle a natural disposition to create and initiate solutions to the problems that they faced. When we fail to see this kink in the cultural "DNA" of creativity in Africa, our good intentions fall short and the problem of poverty remains intact. The outside world continues blindly to pour billions of dollars of aid into the continent, which has done little to solve the crisis. Today, poverty, sickness, and death across Africa continue to prevail, while Africans have become almost entirely dependent upon handouts from foreign entities to nurse the symptoms of a chronic and deeply rooted problem.

During the Colonial Era, the local farmers were not in charge, and their roles were limited to planting and harvesting the crops. The colonial experts were in charge of the processing, transportation, and sale of finished products. Even after independence, as noted by Suruma, "The new country's basic economic infrastructure—banks, factories, railways, plantations, and other critical productive entities—remained, as they had been during the colonial period, under the ownership and control of foreign[ers]" (28). Now that Africans are no longer under the yoke of imperialist governments and are in charge of their own fate, the mandate for development falls into their own hands. It is time to join the rest of the world in shaping a better future for the next generation. Twenty-first-century globalization offers the people in the global south the opportunity for enlightenment and information sharing. Governments and the private sectors should take advantage of the global economy to create development initiatives.

Creating local markets

Many people assume that because of globalization, the rest of the world has a fair shot at participation in trade. In reality, this involvement is not feasible for everyone, especially the local farmers in remote villages. Local markets need to be strengthened to promote local trading. According to Fratianni, "Consumption, for example, has a strong domestic bias. Distance and borders are two important reasons for this bias and are a powerful deterrent to globalization" (8). Many local farmers in Uganda have no knowledge or understanding of how the global economy functions. These farmers live in remote places where information flow is hampered by lack of electricity, Internet access, infrastructures, modern means of transportation, and the language barrier. They cannot rely on the global market.

The problem of production and marketing is felt at the local level. According to the International Monetary Fund:

> Most farmers in Uganda sell less than 50 percent of their produce and this is done mainly at the farm gate… poor people continue to face problems in processing, storing and marketing their agricultural produce… exploitation by traders, poor roads, unfavorable tax regime, lack of market information, unequal gender relations and lack of effective organization were identified as the major causes of the marketing problems. (95)

The unfairness of international trade causes poor farmers to be affected by dumped goods and foods from other countries. Dumped goods muzzle local production. When the local market is flooded with foreign cheap goods, local producers can no longer profit from their products and production halts. There is, therefore, a greater need to promote economic interactions at the local level through the constant movement of goods and services within a single geographical area.

Furthermore, a local market system such as a farmers' market was highly recommended by the local farmers during my fieldwork. They believe that organizing themselves in farming communities is the first step toward boosting local sales of produce. In an interview, a local farmer named Gummaka lamented, "What good is it if you toil all year round only to see your crop rot because there is no market." A general frustration seems to exist among local farmers because of lack of market. As a result, the local farmers see the need to organize themselves into farming communities as a starting point. The next step would be holding a monthly, organized farmers' market to showcase and sell their best products to the local community.

There are many benefits when local farmers come together. As noted by Ochieng, "Farmer groups as an institution of collective action offer opportunity for smallholders to participate in the market more effectively. They can enhance market access for smallholder farmers, which in turn increases household income, food security, more employment and sustainable agricultural growth" (45). Once local farmers have organized themselves and improved the quality of their products, they can join the regional trading community, such as the East African Community or EAC. According to UN-OHRLLS, the East African Treaty "[o]utlines co-operation in trade, investment, and industrial development; monetary and fiscal policy; infrastructure and service; human resource, science and technology; free movement and of the factors of production …" (187). When local farmers in Uganda reach a high level of involvement in regional trade, they can raise themselves to a greater standard, resulting in more benefits.

Overall, the improvements that begin at a local level prepare farmers to participate regionally and eventually internationally. When local farmers come together and begin to interact with their counterparts in the region, they benefit from information sharing, quality regulation, and foreign exchange.

Promoting best practices

A key advantage of living in the Twenty-first century is the free flow of information. Because of globalization, we can learn from one another and share vital information, methods, and skills to improve human life around the world. In addition, since we share common challenges, we can learn from others who have had similar experiences. Accordingly, local farmers in Uganda can learn from other communities and individuals from around the world who are practicing successful agriculture. Local farmers can also look to several of their counterparts in Uganda who have implemented better agricultural practices. One such farmer is Andrew Rugasira, the proprietor of the famous *Good African Coffee* that now sells in the global market. Like many other farmers in Uganda, Andrew has learned the secret and power of agricultural investment in his own country. At a local level, farmers may adopt low-cost practices such as preparing their gardens in time for the first rain, wisely choosing crops (planting more crops with shorter gestation periods) and covering the topsoil to reduce water loss.

Due to prolonged drought, farmers have recognized the need to abandon perennial crops and to instead plant annual or seasonal crops such as sweet potatoes, tomatoes, beans, rice, and cabbage. As noted by Freyfogle, "The choice is understandable, since annual plants take hold more quickly and bear more abundantly than perennial do…" (7). The pictures below show some examples of the seasonal crops that I saw during my fieldwork. These farmers are enthusiastic about planting different seasonal crops and they are reaping a great harvest, sometimes more than once per year.

Beans Cabbage

Local farmers are implementing another good practice: the maintenance of soil health. Sustainable agriculture starts with the soil by seeking to reduce soil erosion and making improvements to physical structure, organic matter content, water-holding capacity, and nutrient balance. Local farmers are improving soil health through the use of legumes, green manures, and cover crops: the incorporation of plants with the capacity to release phosphate from the soil in rotations. Some farmers are using compost and animal manure, adopting zero-tillage, and supplementing with inorganic fertilizers where needed.

It is inspiring that countries which once-agrarian communities leaped into modern economies, through agricultural transformation. As noted by Alam, "From a background of a colonial agrarian open economy, Malaysia formally started her industrialization journey in 1957 and proceeded phase by phase through the roadmap of development to realize her vision of becoming a 'fully developed' nation by 2020" (401). It is important to note that these countries did not have instant success. They had to overcome numerous challenges. Poor communities, however, can avoid their mistakes and utilize the practices that worked for those countries. Agricultural transformation takes hard work and has many stages, depending on the challenges in the region. One of these challenges may be drought, which can be alleviated through irrigation. Another could be soil exhaustion, which can be managed by the proper use of fertilizer. Additionally, a common challenge in these agricultural communities is poor road networks. However, the communities that have transcended these challenges can give vital lessons to others.

Strengthening local leadership

Strong, visionary leadership is a central part of the development process. Without capable leaders, there is little progress in a society. Post-colonial Africa has been and continues to be a victim of poor leadership, which is characterized by susceptibility to imperialist manipulation, lack of national spirit and patriotism, corruption, immature politics, and nepotism, among others. As the old saying goes, "the fish starts rotting from its head." If the dream of community development is to be realized, young leaders need to rise up to assume the mandate of current and future leadership.

For sustainable development to be achieved in any local context, strong leadership must be a priority. When groups are formed, rules are set, and able leadership is critical for executing those rules. Leadership and rules are critical to the success of any group or society. Many group endeavors fail because rules and regulations are imposed upon rather than developed by members themselves. When members create the rules, it increases the likelihood of successful adherence by everyone. One of the weaknesses of externally funded programs is the imposed rules that are unfamiliar in the local context, causing greater cultural conflict. There is a need for informed local leadership and an establishment of culturally appropriate rules and regulations that are generated by the people themselves.

Furthermore, at a community level, leaders play important roles of mobilization, providing a sense of direction, guiding implementation of policies and programs, settling disputes, and fostering teamwork. As noted by Sinek, "The role of a leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of a leader is to create an environment in which great ideas can happen. It is the people ..., those at the front line, who are best qualified to find new ways of doing things" (99). This model is still lacking in the context of Ugandan leadership. Ugandan political and cultural leaders continue to operate under "high power distance" and assume ultimate power and control. According to Hofstede, "Power distance can be defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Institutions are the basic elements of society, such as the family, the school, and the community" (chap. 3, par. 18). As indicated by Hofstede's indices of cultural dimensions, Uganda falls under the East African category with a 66 on the Power Distance Index, or PDI. Some of the indications of high power distance in Ugandan culture are lack of freedom of expression (the fear of questioning leaders), autocracy, and victimization of the innocent. In my opinion, implications of high power distance are more negative than positive. Autocracy, for instance, is detrimental to development in many ways, for instance, it blocks many good ideas from "unpopular places" and from the led. As observed by Maxwell, "Leadership is influence – nothing more, nothing less" (17). Good leaders must be democratic and benevolent.

Many African leaders tend to operate under leadership myths of pioneering, position, and knowledge. For example, the current ruling power, the National Resistance Movement (NRM) of Uganda took over power in the 1986 guerrilla war. Children born after 1986 have never seen a another president. The NRM government claims that they are the pioneers and revolutionaries who have earned the right to lead the country. Unfortunately, no one is allowed to question these motives as freedom of expression and speech is muzled. While elections are held, the votes are a mere symbol of democracy.

When a country lacks civil, social, and economic participation, development comes at a slower pace. Perhaps this explains why democratic and lower power distance societies experience more robust growth and development than their counterparts with high power distance, like Uganda, where leaders only seek to bolster their reign and profit from public resources.

In community development work, leaders also play an important role in unifying the people. Because community development is a collective responsibility that brings together people who may not share a similar belief background, it requires leaders who understand all groups and can create a diverse team. Groups are often divided because of interpersonal issues, which is why we need servant leaders who can bring harmony and engage everyone productively. The old African leadership model tends to exalt leaders above the law and that gives them a false sense of control, but when it comes to enforcement, such leaders are rendered powerless because they lack the moral authority to command respect and following.

Weak leaders also perpetuate the cycle. In this new model, I argue that young people should be engaged and trained. In Uganda, for instance, there are very few leaders who lead by example. As a result, potential leaders are left without mentors to teach them. To avoid repeating similar leadership styles in the future, leaders need to intervene and mentor young adults. In an interview, Ongom asserted that "[t]he time is now for selfless people to invest in the younger generation because if we don't, Africa will experience worse leadership crises in the future than we already have." During our time of potent leadership discussion, Ongom expressed deep concern that today's leaders have failed in their primary role of modeling a better future because they have led for their own gratification. Indeed, Africa's underdevelopment is tied to its poor leadership, and only by improving leadership can Africa experience transformation in other areas, beginning with the minds of the people.

Helpful leadership tips: essential for community development

a) Credible leadership

This section is based on my own leadership journey and experiences. The transformational journey and society as a whole are fruitless and void without trustworthy leadership. In his book *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, Maxwell observes that "[e]very message that people receive is filtered through the messenger who delivers it. If you consider the messenger to be credible, then you believe the message has value" (146-147). When a leader is not trustworthy, well-meaning people find it hard to follow them or buy into their vision. As a growing leader, I place more importance on my personal credibility than on my vision or plans.

b) Strength-based leadership

In the book *Living your Strength: Discover your God-given Talent and Inspire Your Community,* Winseman et al. explore the idea that successful people build their lives around their strengths and focus on their talents. The authors also provide a strength-finder exercise that enables readers to explore their own signature strengths. During my work in Africa, I met people in leadership positions who lacked the qualities necessary to sustain them in those roles. As noted by Winseman et al., "Only by knowing your talents and strengths and by living through them can you be the best that you can be" (12). Certain qualities are required in leadership, and a leader ought to possess both charisma and the skills to be able to lead effectively. In community development work, strength-based leadership goes a long way in yielding fruitful conversation and successful processes.

Over the years, I have learned that the best place to begin the leadership journey is self-discovery. Winseman et al. note that "When you discover your talents, you begin to discover your calling. When you build and apply strengths by making the most of your greatest talents, you fulfill your calling" (228). I find truth and comfort in this assertion because people are more effective when they function within the area of their expertise and calling. Unfortunately, many people are placed in fields that do not align with their inherent strengths and talents.

c) The motive and expectation of a leader

Those who assume a leadership position void of the necessary qualifications and strength are bound to fail at their job. However, those who take up leadership roles without credibility and character cause more damage. When a leader is motivated by self-enrichment, rather than the will to serve, people suffer. The world is in chaos because of leaders who lack a strong sense of "why" they are in leadership. Indeed, leadership must start with a strong sense of "why" because a clear sense of purpose refines motive and yields greater fulfillment. The two most important questions I have learned to ask myself are: why? and why not? In other words, if I plan to do something, I ask myself: *Why am I doing it*? When I choose not to do something, I also must ask myself: *Why not*? The ability to answer these two questions is the definition of purpose. If I feel like my feet are drifting off the course of my commitments and my joy and fulfillment are waning, I quickly realize that my sense of "why" is unclear or is clouded with life's difficulties. In addition, when fear and uncertainty of the future cloud the focus of a leader, that person begins to lose their balance. A leader must keep a constant focus on their purpose. Essentially, leadership is not effective without a deep sense of purpose and commitment to the greater good.

Furthermore, when the conviction of a leader is not imbued with the urgent mandate to serve humanity, leadership becomes a self-seeking agenda. I am afraid of becoming a self-seeker and not a servant of the people. I prefer the latter because I know that ultimately all that matters is what I have done for others during my lifetime and the final approval from the Lord. Further, as a Christian leader, I am aware that my call to serve comes from God, who also holds me to a high standard of accountability. As noted by Sinek, "When a WHY goes fuzzy, it becomes much more difficult to maintain the growth, loyalty, and inspiration that helped drive the original success" (50). Therefore, leaders must keep a constant check on their "why," regularly evaluating their motives and actions and moving in the right direction.

d) Leading from outside the box

A leader of the people must keep an open heart and mind. As pointed out by the Arbinger Institute, "[w]hen we are in the box, our view of reality is distorted – we see neither ourselves nor others clearly. We are self-deceived. And that creates all kinds of trouble for the people around us" (49). The work of community development, especially the need to interact globally with people of various backgrounds, requires us to receive others into our inner circles. Leaders play a critical role in unifying society. This task begins by appealing to the human goodness in all people. Leaders must create a culture and environment where people are treated with respect and dignity, not as objects. To be successful in our work, we need others, not just their contributions, to have a mutual relationship. As noted by the Arbinger Institute, "… as long as I am focused on myself, I can't fully focus either on results or on the people to whom I am to be delivering those results" (109). Therefore, our success as leaders depends on the ability to exist collectively.

e) A growing leader

To make a lasting impact in the community, a leader ought to be selfless, humble, and have a strong will to do the right thing. This does not happen overnight, and successful leaders keep making changes in their lives. They work toward self-actualization. Until a leader is selfless in serving others, there is still room to change and to grow. Most leaders, especially in Africa where I culturally subscribe, need to grow in the area of self-actualization. Leaders who do not seek self-gratification carry a strong power of influence. Such leaders are described by Jim Collins as Level 5 leaders. Leadership is judged by the level of influence, not power. As observed by Collins, "If you're engaged in work that you love and care about, for whatever reason, then the question [of greatness] needs no answer" (209). Our lives should move people to follow us, not the loudness of our voice.

f) Gainful partnership

Sometimes helping hurts. How can those who have good intentions avoid being stuck in the muck of frustration because their efforts are not working? In this model, I argue that partnership and developmental work must focus on contextualization. The rich and poor people in a community, country, and the world need each other. The poor must be consulted in community development. A contextualized and careful collaboration (which does not perpetuate dependence), can benefit poor communities in unprecedented ways. For example, by collaborating with richer and more developed countries and agencies, poor communities can access new information and modern technologies that can enable them to begin transformation. The involvement of foreigners, however, ought to avoid perpetuating the dependence mentality. In an interview, Kristen Marks, an American friend of mine who works in Uganda, noted that,

> Community development should be community driven. It should be based on what the community needs, and most importantly it is all about participation. By encouraging participation, we give and maintain the dignity of the people. We foreigners should act in ways that are respectful to the people by acknowledging their unique abilities given by God to be creators. A lot of times we want to do things for the people without their participation, that is just wrong. By doing this, foreigners suppress local creativity by flooding their economies with subsidies and finished products. Development should be done in a way that promotes human flourishing. In the economy of God, there is enough to go around. Another important aspect is to acknowledge that the traditional Christian and family values are important in development. (Marks, personal communication, 27 July 2017)

Her statement connects well with the message of contextual development embodied by this study. It is a message that all those who wish to be involved in developmental work should bear in mind: that it is imperative for local people to be at the center of that work. Many mistakes have been made because foreigners and the locals themselves have not understood the essence of sustainable collaboration for local development.

Once a local community has been supported with the necessary tools, knowledge, and resources they need to get started, it is critical that the foreigners lessen their control and leave room for the locals to flourish. As observed by Glenwinkle, the president of Village Care International, "We understand that the catalyst necessary to effect change is to allow people's natural capacity to solve their own problems emerge" *(Villagecare.org)*. Unlike some international organizations that tend to spoon feed the poor, Village Care is among the few organizations that focus on empowering the people to look inward for their own natural capacity. This approach appeals to me deeply because I believe that when relief and other forms of assistance are mishandled, they can exacerbate instead of reduce the problem.

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