

CHAPTER FOUR

How Communities CHANGE – from despair to possibility



If the community was a person, it would have been diagnosed as suffering from chronic depression. Both of the large automotive plants had closed and there was over 26% unemployment. The town and its surrounding municipality did not communicate and in over two decades had never voted together for their joint benefit. Homelessness was pervasive, the hospitals for the mentally ill had been closed and that population sent out on the streets. The main street of the town seemed populated only by drug dealers and patrons of the adult book stores. When discussing the town's situation, despair and blame dominated the conversation. There seemed to be no hope at all.

On the corner of the main street stood the public library. The homeless folks used the fountain in its garden to do their laundry and the back loading dock as their lavatory. In the winter they sheltered, warm and safe, in the reading room. Yet every day, children arrived for story time, students came to fill up the tables to study, and senior citizens came to chat with each other and work to put on a huge used book sale each summer, which seemed briefly to celebrate the community and its former vitality.

Homelessness was pervasive, the hospitals for the mentally ill had been closed ...

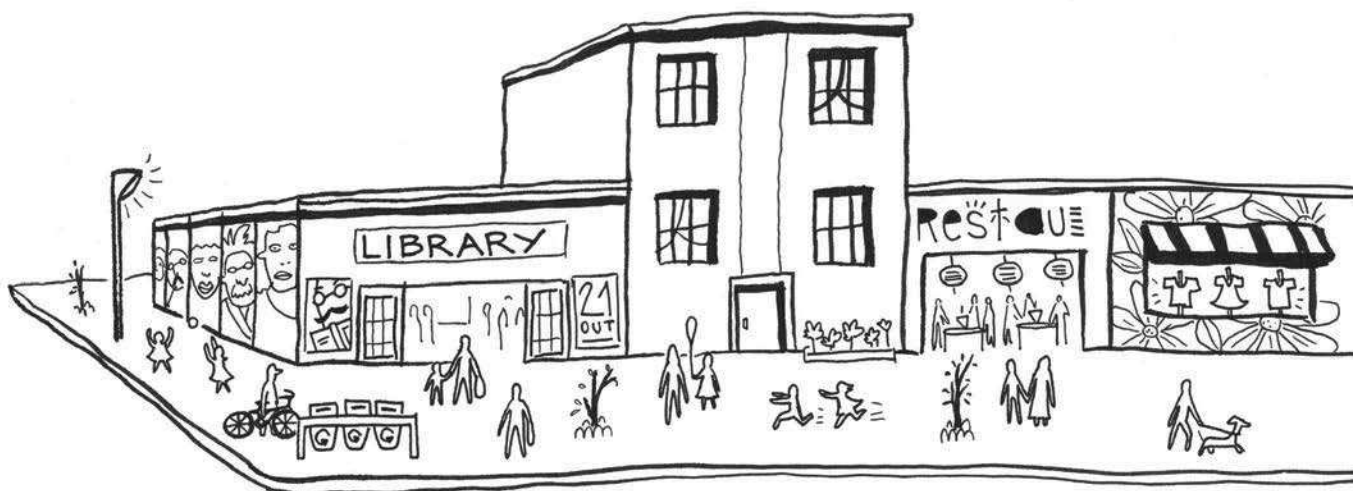
It was the catalyst because it changed people's perspective from despair to possibility.

Then the city's manager said that the public library must be closed, to reduce the city's budget. When I walked into the library and asked what they were going to do about this, the staff and the library board said nothing could be done.

Fast forward three years later, and 984 dedicated volunteers celebrated their victory in a public vote with a three to one majority that created a district library, which unified the city and its municipality, gave it independent funding of more than eight times the budget the city had cut, and changed local and state law regarding public libraries. More than two decades later, the library won a national award for the best community library in the nation. Its mission is "to enrich life, stimulate intellectual curiosity, foster literacy and encourage an informed citizenry".

Today everyone recognizes that the library is the hub of an energetic and thriving community. The Main Street of the town is now vibrant with activity: there are new businesses, many restaurants, and a number of artists' cooperatives. Each year the huge celebration of heritage draws crowds to the town, and to the library's used book sale.

The Save the Library campaign was by no means the sole cause of this economic and social recovery. It was the catalyst because it changed people's perspective from despair to possibility. There is a grand new library now, with all sorts of technological tools available to patrons, and busy programs reaching out across the region, but the old library in the heart of downtown is treasured. It is still a sacred place of dignity and discovery, and citizens are proud that it connects them to each other, and to its purpose. (Pssst, if you are curious about how things changed, keep reading...)



How does a community turn itself around when times are bad?

What brings people together to demand that those in power respect their rights and work with them to address their needs and realise their dreams?

In this chapter we will look at stories of communities that have brought about change and explore what allowed them to do this. These stories are not special or out of the ordinary – there are millions of such stories, some documented, most not. These stories were brought to us by development practitioners and community members who wanted to understand better how they had achieved change, both for themselves and so that others could learn from them. By exploring these stories in depth we try to capture what they have in common so that others know what to look for, what to nurture and what they need to be wary of.



What is community?

When we hear the word ‘community’ the image that springs to mind will depend on where we live and what we do but, for most of us, it will probably include:

- A group of people living in the same location who know each other well and know each other’s business.
- People who have a shared history and/or identity.
- People who spend time with each other – farm together, play together, share a similar culture or at least are respectful of each other’s cultures.
- People who support each other when there is a crisis – but whose relationships are also vulnerable to crisis.
- People who make decisions together about their environment and the group – though not necessarily with equal power.
- Strong and close relationships that can mean that people are able to work together but also that there is potential for conflict that can be both creative and destructive.

Communities hold the potential for both cooperation and conflict.

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Human beings are social beings.... and from the earliest times have gathered together to hunt, live, farm, play and to be creative. Our survival has depended on this and living and working together has led to the creation of villages, towns, cities, and also tribes and nations, creating a sense of identity and fostering commitment.

Politicians use the word “community” in an overwhelmingly positive way – as something we should aspire to that will enable people to live well, foster resilience and generally bring out the best in us. Since the 1970s, development practitioners have focused their interventions on communities and community development has become a discipline in itself.

But it is no accident that murder mysteries are typically set in small, tight-knit communities. It is the intricate connections between the characters that provide the tension and drama. Everyone cares about everyone else, in a positive or negative way, and whatever one person does has an effect on the others. Conflict is an intrinsic part of community and for every nostalgic account of growing up in a small village, there is an account of a young person desperate to escape the limitations and lack of privacy of village life.

Communities hold the potential for both cooperation and conflict. Both of these can be negative as well as positive and it is by working with these elements that communities can create or hinder social change.

21st Century Communities

With the advent of long-distance travel and the internet, the concept of community has become complex. Communities do not have to live together or work together. Groups of people who share the same interests or concerns and meet together through a website, chatroom or more formal grouping may call themselves a community. Their relationships may spread beyond the thing that first brought them together but often the community remains defined by their specialist interest (a community of hiking enthusiasts), their profession (a community of psychotherapists), and so on. These people may never meet face-to-face. They can also be riven by conflict and provide support during difficult times in much the same way that physical communities do. Groups of people may coalesce around a single issue or concern. They may sign a petition, debate and plan actions. They may meet to take action or lobby the government. These groups may be timebound; once the issue has been resolved or the change has happened, the group may disperse or it may move on to a new issue. Can we also call these kinds of groups communities? Or are they rather movements that bring different communities together, uniting to bring about a good that goes beyond a community to benefit society as a whole?



These new ways of meeting and taking action with people are increasingly important as many people today do not feel that they are part of a community in the place where they live and work. They may move often and rarely see the people who live close to them. They may be working long hours and cannot get involved in initiatives to change their physical environment. While political parties and advertisers use the language of community, they are often using it to get us to make individual choices about what we buy or who we vote for. The rhetoric of community is being used to separate and differentiate rather than to unite.

Active communities can be the bridge between change happening at the personal and at the regional or national level. But communities can also be resistant to needed change, suspicious of outsiders and take satisfaction in being different from those around them. Sometimes communities resist change because it violates what matters to them. Sometimes communities need an outsider to give them a fresh perspective on their situation or to introduce a different way of doing things. But outsiders can rarely force change to happen. They have to work with the dynamics that exist in the community and the changes that happen may not be what they expected.

Communities are complicated, each with its unique personalities and relationships, a history that they themselves are often unaware of and power dynamics that are difficult for outsiders to fathom. Many people nowadays are not part of only one community but many. These communities relate to our identities, our interests and our beliefs. I am part of a geographical community but also a religious community and a professional community. I may behave differently in different communities, but what is happening in one community may affect how I behave in others.

How can people in communities and people who work with communities encourage and bring about positive social change? How can we avoid inadvertently making things worse rather than better? What moves communities to act together to push for social change?



How would you define community? Write your answer in 5 minutes without lifting your pen from the paper. When you have finished read through and underline the words and phrases that most strike you. If you can, do this with a friend and have a discussion afterwards about what you think community is.

“What moves communities to act together to push for social change?”



Heather Wood Ion, who was involved in the library campaign reflects on what happened.

The Library brings Life... What actually happened?

The library was not saved and transformed because every citizen wanted it to be; it was saved because a small group saw beyond the grief and the limits of what had been experienced and then worked together to discover new ways for the future. They papered the windows of the vacant buildings on Main Street with a poster which said "The Best Adult Book Store in Town is Your Public Library". They got people thinking and got them involved. They helped others to see that change was possible.

Government entities came together to change the law, businesses came together to support a public cause, educational institutions redefined themselves as contributors to a much bigger purpose, civic groups saw themselves as cooperative rather than competitive, and those who used the library saw themselves as bearers of a mission and a tradition important to an unknown future. At first, most citizens expressed real doubt about involving the unemployed in the campaign and even said that unions would have no interest in a library. Again, some people were able to see beyond the label 'unemployed' to the person underneath. A volunteer living with mental illness, who had often sought sanctuary in the library, commented as he stuffed envelopes for the campaign: "I like being valued for what I can do to help, not just labelled as in need of help."

The Leading Causes of Life

Gary Gunderson has developed a framework that encapsulates many of the key things that really matter and enable social change. He calls them the Leading Causes of Life. The Leading Causes of Life are explored in more detail in Barefoot Guide 3: Mobilising Religious Health Assets for Transformation, Chapter 4.

Intergenerativity

We bridge, with gratitude and responsibility, what came before and what will come after us. When our lives are blessed and nurtured by those who come before and after us, we become encouraged, strengthened, enlivened and more able to shape our own lives, to make vital choices.

Hope

Imagination helps us construct the lives we want to live and the legacies we want to leave. Hope in the deepest sense is about imagining a different, healthier future and finding the energy to do something to try to bring that future into being. If we can see a positive future this nurtures the life force to enable it to happen.

Coherence

We seek meaning from experience; our brains form and seek patterns. Coherence refers to the many ways we make sense of life, how life makes sense to us, to see our journey as intelligible and not wholly random or victim to inexplicable forces.



Agency

To have the will and the resourcefulness to act, and to act with the full capabilities we have as human beings, is a central 'cause' of life.

Connection

As human beings we find life through complex social relationships and connections to one another, building communities of various kinds that enable us to adapt to changing threats and opportunities.

*It is the questions
we ask which lead
us forth as explorers
and pioneers.*

The library campaign took place before Gary developed this framework, but I believe it was successful because it generated and cultivated these qualities.

The five terms are powerful in focusing attention and effort. Placing them in context, they remind us of Schweitzer's "Reverence for Life", and their roots lie in the work done in hospices for those with HIV, which had to transform itself into work with the young orphans left behind by the pandemic and focus on their lives, not on death.

The language of life is both clarifying—it helps us ask ourselves what our efforts are for?—and enabling—by focusing our attention on what we can do with and for each other. It serves as an invitation to see our lives in a new way, to reframe our experience from an enriched perspective and to discover new tools within our capacities. Its moral dimension lies in creating sacred space for both the making of sense and the work of living. Saving the public library became for many of the volunteers just such a moral or spiritual commitment. They were aware that they were both saving and creating a sanctuary and a community which would be sustained far beyond their own engagement. One library patron said "We do not have a home, we do not have a safe place, we do not have anywhere that leaves us to be ourselves, except here. This is our safe place."

All is not consistently positive, and the language of life must embrace the shadows and the suffering in every life. Yet the language reminds us that the seeds of joy are hidden in that struggle, and that our awareness of despair and pain helps us appreciate the discoveries made visible to us when we change our perspectives. When the library was temporarily closed campaigners put a wreath of mourning on its doors, and that grief helped to fuel the effort to renew and reform the community.

If we work within systems of denial, or try to build on a faith which is based on a fear of death, we will find ourselves living in societies based on fear, not on the vitality we yearn to experience. Often our economic models delude us into thinking that public measures of success will provide meaning, but most of these measures are not relevant to a meaningful and sustainable life, to connection, coherence, agency, intergenerativity and hope. If my own value is to be measured merely by economic outputs, why should I be concerned that my methods and behaviours treat others with similar instrumentalism? If a public library is only valued for how small its budget can be in the city's accounts, no one will recognize that it can be a home, a sanctuary, a place of wonder, a transformative catalyst of change.

We live in neighbourhoods yet often do not know our neighbours. And we work with colleagues we depend on, yet we often do not know their talents. We can in our own lives create these ceremonies of renewal, and through them, because they are resonant with life, gain or borrow courage until the next time we gather. A potluck, a street fair, or even a simple birth announcement can gather strangers together to celebrate living.

The language of life can change who we are and what we do, because it affirms and strengthens what we human beings have always known: we find healing and wholeness with each other. We must continuously celebrate that this making of sanctuary is sacred work. We are midwives to the future, and our work exists in order to create more life. It is the

questions we ask which lead us forth as explorers and pioneers. As we teach our children that questions are more important than answers, and seeking requires as much celebration and discipline as does finding, let us move forward with reverence knowing that living with reverence is living with wonder. Our task is to explode the constraints on our imagination and release all that we can become to pursue Life.

The story of the library is not unusual. It often takes a crisis to bring a community together to make a change and, if they are successful, this often inspires them to use that change as the springboard for other changes. But what helps people to get started, to inspire others and keep going?

The Leading Causes of Life were developed as a response to work in the HIV & AIDS sector. Gunderson realised that the work with children orphaned by HIV & AIDS needed to focus not on dying but on living. He and many others believe that if the five causes are nurtured then positive social change is possible.

Heather argues that it was because the community action to save the library unconsciously incorporated all the elements needed to bring the community back to life that it was so successful. When you read the other stories in this chapter, it will be useful to reflect on whether the causes are present in those stories too. The Leading Causes of Life is just one lens through which to look at social change and it has been used to help people seeking to bring about change, particularly in the area of health. You can find out more at <http://www.leading-causes.com/>.

QUESTIONS:

How were the Leading Causes of Life cultivated in the library campaign?

Do you think this is a useful way of understanding and promoting social change?



Through community meetings, people were able to identify the root causes and propose solutions by themselves.

What also interests me is the inclusiveness of the process. It would have been easy for those people who started the protest to exclude the homeless and the poor. They would probably have won their case, but would the rejuvenation of the town still have happened? Or would the changes have benefited only the wealthier residents? Because some people were willing to connect with those who had been excluded but who valued the library, the town became more united and more understanding of each other and everyone benefited. Bringing about social change for ourselves may be easier but bringing about social change that benefits all means we have to reach out to people we may feel uncomfortable around but who are nevertheless part of our community. Unless we reach out to them and enable them to be involved, the change will be partial and may lead to more injustice.

Changing ourselves

Most of the stories in this chapter are about people demanding change from the authorities. In the next story a community receives help from the authorities, but they are unable to benefit from it because the assistance did not understand the community. The community wants the change but at first they cannot see how it can happen. They have to decide whether it is worthwhile to make fundamental changes to their way of life. How are they able to do this?

Let the Kitchen Talk

By Vu Le Minh

"You can stay in my house tonight. No worries about mosquitoes! Haha, I have a bed net for you. Come, come!"

I spent that night talking with Ho Van Binh, the house owner, also the head of the health station in A Tuc commune, about the epidemic.

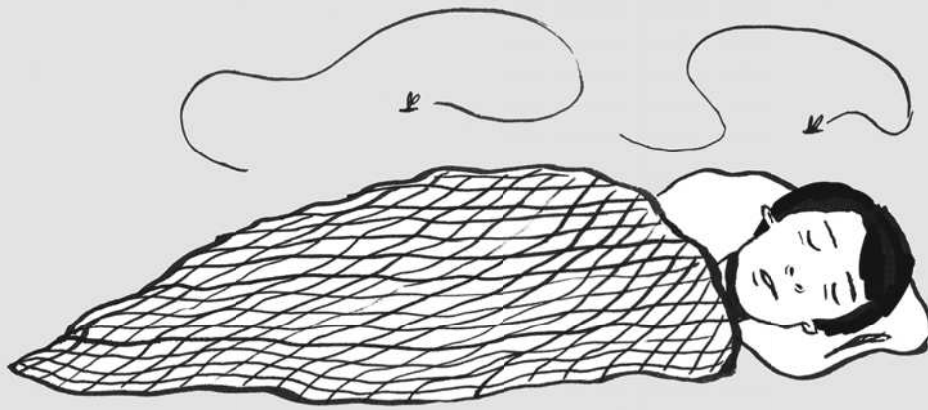
"I heard there was a high prevalence of malaria in the community. How's that now?"

"It's still a problem, but the rate's much lower now. You can't imagine how bad it was a couple of years ago."

Huong Hoa is a remote district of Vietnam where the risk of contracting malaria is high. Eighty percent of the population are from ethnic minorities. In 2005, 1,500 people out of a population of 90,000 contracted malaria. Six of these became severely ill and one died.

Then the National Malaria Control Program (NMCP) of Vietnam came to help. Its interventions focused on promoting the use of impregnated mosquito nets, spraying houses with permethrin, providing free diagnosis and treatment to poor patients, organising training for health staff at grassroots level, applying monitoring and evaluation systems, and promoting health education via posters and loudspeaker systems.

The NMCP strategies were evaluated by the district and commune authorities as effective as it treated thousands of people at risk of malaria and equipped them with mosquito nets. Despite these activities, the decrease in the number of people affected with malaria was slow and the disease remained widespread in the area, especially in poor and remote communities.



Why weren't the measures working? The national program had a standard approach that was based on selected technology and applied it in the same way everywhere. Local context was not taken into account. People were not involved in finding out what would work in their own community.

In addition, the programme made a number of assumptions. For instance, it assumed that mosquitoes bred in pools just outside houses so the authorities ignored unhygienic practices inside houses that encouraged mosquitoes to breed. Another assumption was that people could get rid of mosquitoes simply by using bed nets, so much of the program's budget was allocated to purchasing mosquito nets. The NMCP applied a "fixed" formula on the number of nets per household based on the sleeping habits of the Kinh majority, not taking into account local variations.

People were aware of how malaria was contracted but traditional practices took precedence over instructions from the authorities. Many people got sick. Some died. They lost a lot of work during harvest season because of weakness due to malaria.

"At that time, all of us were in misery and we wanted to do something to change," a villager told me, "but we didn't really know what to do and how to make it happen."

The Medical Committee Netherlands - Vietnam (MCNV) helped to create a space for the villagers themselves to identify and prioritise problems, analyse root causes, barriers, opportunities and resources to cope with malaria. They proposed solutions that were then described in their own village health development plans. These plans were submitted to relevant parties for technical and financial support, and once approved they were implemented with full participation of local people in a complete project cycle.



One central principle was to listen to local people and to let them do what they could. In community meetings, tackling malaria was seen as the top priority. When asked about why they did not fully participate in the Government program such as not using bed nets regularly and properly, local people came up with various reasons that were surprising to outsiders.

“Hanging a bed net so close to where we sleep is risky; it would catch fire easily,” a man said. Traditionally, people slept round the kitchen fire. The risk of fire outweighed the risk of malaria so most people did not use the nets.

“I think the policy [on the ratio of bed net over household] by the health sector was inappropriate,” a woman shared. “Because in a family men, women and children all sleep together around the fire. So what could we do with one bed net for all?”

Many of them used bed nets for other purposes. “I’ve seen many people using bed nets as blankets when it gets cold,” a boy said, “some of them even used bed nets to catch fish on the nearby lake.”

The habit of raising animals and using open toilets around the house contributed to the spread of malaria. Local people made full use of the ground space under their stilt houses to raise animals. This damp place was an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes.

“You can’t imagine how dirty the houses looked,” a health worker said. “Each time I paid home visits to local people for health check-ups, I wore a gauze mask and had to tread carefully as manure lay scattered on the ground.”

Through community meetings, people were able to identify the root causes and propose solutions by themselves.

“We agreed that using a bed net is vital to protect us from mosquitoes,” a young man said, “but we wondered how we could use it next to the fire.”

The local people discussed this and some of them proposed separating the kitchen from the sleeping room. The risk of fire would then no longer stop people using nets.

The initiative of separating the kitchen from the main house met fierce resistance from other local people. Many people felt angry and left the community meeting quickly.

“No one dared to carry out the proposed idea,” a woman added, “otherwise he would be the black sheep of the whole village.”

Things remained unchanged until two months later. The number of people infected with malaria continued to increase. Some people died.

“So we held a meeting again in the evening,” an old man said. “We discussed and tried to find a way out. But we could not find any good solution. Then some of us had to take the risk and propose separating the kitchen again. The meeting room became noisy with sounds of disagreement. We could not start the meeting. Luckily, some of the oldest men, including my father, stood up and shouted: ‘That’s enough! No-one among us wants to change our customs. Ok. But then what? Our people still get sick and die. Our children still miss school. Our men are still unable to work in the fields. We will surely die soon if we don’t do anything to change! If you have any better idea, say it now!’”

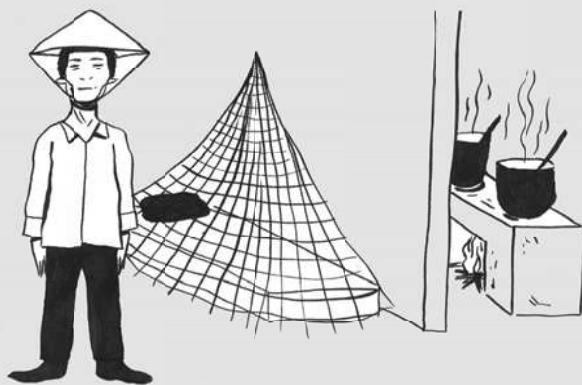


The meeting lasted until midnight. The idea was finally accepted by almost all the participants, but no one volunteered to take a leading role in making it happen.

“My father was the pioneer,” a village head said with pride. “He encouraged his relatives and children to carry it out. We used the nets, but we could not sleep well without the kitchen fire. My children said they felt cold. But it was our promise, for our own sakes. One week later, things seemed alright and we felt better. Our neighbours then learnt to do the same.”

The initiative was rolled out within this village and then to other villages and communities.

Local people felt cold when they slept far away from the kitchen, so many of them used bed nets as blankets. MCNV helped people to buy blankets and bed nets at half price. Community self-help groups were established to train villagers how to fix and maintain old bed nets. Villagers also negotiated with the national programme to provide additional nets to ensure everyone was covered.



Drama in the local language was used to raise awareness of malaria in communities and promote the use of mosquito nets. Villagers, especially children and youth, worked together to design and actively participate in local games such as javelin throwing. MCNV provided support in building domestic latrines and shelters for livestock away from the houses. At the community's request, MCNV helped them set up community funds to finance projects to improve the community.

“There have been significant changes in the communities,” Cu Giac Hien, the Head of Xy commune's health station told me. “I do think it all started from the separation of the kitchen from the house.”

Some men revealed that when moving out of the kitchen, they built separate rooms for different family members just like Kinh people did. They felt that because of this the relationship between them and their wives improved. Others also built separate shelters for their animals away from their house which meant their children had a clean space to play in.

“It was us who faced the problem,” a local man said, “and when we were able to meet up with each other to tackle the problem, we thought we could overcome it.”

Can Dieu, a young woman, revealed: “I think, besides that, another more important reason was that we had brave people who dared to make the change first. When things improved, other people followed.”

Currently malaria still exists in the area but it is not as severe as it was before. According to the 2012 report on malaria control by the district health sector, the number of local people affected with malaria is down to 611 with no deaths or severe infections.

“Malaria is still a problem but we are confident enough to declare that it can be controlled now,” the Director of Huong Hoa district's Preventive Health Centre said. “We have learnt much from the past, especially from the story about the kitchen. We already have the “Three Withs” motto (Eat With, Stay With, and Do With local people), but now we recognise how important they are.”



If local cultural practices are ignored, then technical solutions can be useless ...

What can we learn here?

We are always being told we must scale up our activities and replicate successful projects. But this story reminds us that it is not as simple as that. Mosquito nets have saved hundreds of thousands of lives all over the world but there is no guarantee that they will be effective. If local cultural practices are ignored, then technical solutions can be useless, even if the community can see the benefit.

Changing cultural practices is extremely difficult – female genital mutilation is a good example of this – as they are tied up with people’s identity and self-worth. Outsiders who criticise these practices or tell people to change are likely to be ignored.

This kind of change needs people who are willing to take a risk, to be the first to do this. It helps if they are people who are respected in the community. Leadership is important here. Sometimes they will be people who have power or an official position but not always. And the change will be uncomfortable at first so they have to persevere. Here the role of older people was crucial. People who were respected in the community made the change in their own families. This initially caused discomfort and inconvenience but they had the commitment to see it through.

MCNV, the agency who supported the change, also played an important role. They brought the people together, young and old, and gave them space to discuss the issue. They also gave them time. They did not push people to make a decision; they could make the change at their own speed. The change did not come about at one community meeting. It took several. And the meetings lasted long into the night. This is where timebound projects where targets have to be reached by a certain date can fail. The temptation is to push the change through when the community is not ready, creating resistance. It is highly likely that any changes that do happen when forced will not be sustainable.

MCNV also supported the change when it started to happen, providing things that people needed and persuading the health authorities to do so too. Even if the government’s initial interventions had worked, the compartmentalisation of the work would probably not have enabled the success to be built on and other changes to be made. As with the library, the success of one change provides an excellent opportunity for the community to make further positive changes. In this case the community is stronger because they made the change themselves.

Recognising and addressing injustice

In the next story there is a different approach to change. The change agents are part of the community of the church, but not all of them are part of the geographical community where they seek to bring about change. The church community used a tried and tested approach to bring about change and was able to give the wider community the confidence to get involved in the change too.

In 2007 the general election in Kenya ended in violence. While the intensity and the extent of the violence was unexpected and shocking, it demonstrated that when excluded from power, many people felt that violence was the only way to react. Student demonstrations regularly ended in violence and people in powerful positions used the threat of violence to violate the rights of others, often with impunity because people felt that the courts and the local authorities could not be trusted to defend them.

NON VIOLENCE CONCEPT

Change Agents for Peace International and Quaker Peace & Social Witness introduced Turning the Tide, a non-violent approach to handling conflict and working for justice and peace to try and prevent violence in the 2013 elections.

Turning the Tide methodology uses a participatory and inclusive approach to conflict where all parties are equal though on opposing sides. It seeks to help the participants to understand violence and non-violence in the context of peace. Power, a key factor in governance, is explored to help communities understand how power in the wrong hands can ruin them or, on the other hand, how it can help to build community if those in power understand it as a human relationship, one of **empowerment**. Since 2010, the communities involved have continued to build bridges for peace and justice. Communally they challenge injustices even within themselves or help other community members to see other forms of violence and injustices by collaborating in strategies that will help transform the community and the country into a just society. The concept of power is analysed for the communities to understand how it can be used for positive gains.

The non-violence values and principles applied are:

- Willing to take action for justice without giving into or mimicking violence.
- Respecting and caring for everyone in a conflict, including your opponent.
- Refusing to harm damage or degrade people, living things and the earth as means of achieving goals.

... when excluded from power, many people felt that violence was the only way to react.





- Acting in ways consistent with the ends we seek.
- Being prepared to take suffering on oneself without inflicting it on others.
- Believing that everyone is capable of change and no one has a monopoly on the truth.
- Recognizing the importance of training so that non-violent thinking and behaviour become part of our everyday lives.

[You can find out more about Turning the Tide at <http://www.turning-the-tide.org/>]

Mama Zepreta's Story

Benson Khamasi

Power and rank in Kenya is often used to oppress the poor. A high-ranking government official in the Kenya police force used his rank and power to illegally acquire a farm belonging to this grandmother. It was a place she had called home for over 20 years. She was evicted from the farm and her 6-roomed brick house demolished in the eviction. No legal records could be found in the land registry authenticating the powerful man's ownership of the farm. The community lived in fear but they did not dare challenge the powerful people who were perpetrating injustices. Social change practitioners in the Turning the Tide program and other partner organizations dealing with legal aspects of injustices, specifically for women, managed to file a case in Kakamega high court and obtained an order allowing Mama Zepreta to return to her farm. All parties involved were served with the order, opening up another round in the legal battle between the powerful man and the unknown grandmother.

We were determined to see the law applied to the letter though well aware that a dying horse must give a final kick before it dies. Planning this campaign required



concerted efforts from all like-minded organizations and individuals. We sought direction from key administrative officials like the Area District Commissioner who is in charge of the Security Council in the district. Though he was clear that the law must be followed, he

admitted to not being in a position to implement the order given the fact that the 'buyer' of the land was his senior in government rank and, being a commandant with the police unit, he often deployed armed officers to guard the farm whenever he suspected that Mama Zepreta was planning to go back there.

On the Thursday we intended to take her home, a contingent of armed police officers arrived in the morning in a Government vehicle and waited there the whole day. This confirmed that the powerful man was not ready to respect the rule of law and would use any means available to threaten and intimidate us. The plan was always to change the plan as necessary, so we did not go to the farm but spent the day developing an alternative plan. It became clear that we needed to work with only trusted allies who would not reveal the plan to our opponents. We therefore limited the campaign plans to cluster members and myself until we were ready. We also intentionally resolved not to involve the authorities directly as it was obvious that the land buyer had threatened them with sacking and transfers; hence they could not go against his wishes.

Before the day agreed for the action, we visited the farm to familiarise ourselves with the surroundings. We also visited Mama Zepreta where she was staying in a small church kitchen not so far from her farm. We were moved by the primitive conditions she was now forced to live in with her grandchildren. We also met the Butali market youth in the boda boda industry (motor cycle transport), since Mama Zepreta's son Gilbert was a member, and they assured us of support in the campaign. Only at 8.30pm on the night before the action did we send out invitations to key allies informing them of the plan for the day. This included other Turning the Tide resource persons, civil society organization members and human rights and other activists in the region, including the media.

On the morning of the campaign we said a short prayer and set off. By 9am people started arriving at our meeting point in Butali market, not far from Mama Zepreta's farm. We got all the campaign materials ready and loaded them on a pick-up. The market was slowly waking up for business, not knowing what was about to happen. We got the market fired up with a jig and dance and handed out handbills featuring a newspaper cutting about the eviction. A short briefing of the plan was done to emphasize our non-violence principles and discipline, and many offered to join in the campaign. We set off in a convoy of motorcycles, all beeping and hooting, and women sang songs of praise all the way to the home of Mama Zepreta in Makuu village.



The caretakers who had been hired by the Police Commandant to protect his illegally acquired farm were taken by surprise on seeing such a big crowd at the house. They had been instructed not to allow anyone to enter. The women danced round and round the spacious compound and the entire village came to witness what was happening. Many villagers were happy to receive Mama back many weeks after her eviction. Many too could not believe what they were seeing. They knew the farm had been taken over by a powerful person in government and that it was being guarded by armed police personnel. How could the old grandmother have gotten back her farm when she was so powerless? The community opted to remain silent when Mama Zepreta was forced off her farm, but now they saw how cooperation could challenge power.

We said a prayer and assembled for a group photo. I delivered a press statement on behalf of all those involved. We began to build Mama Zepreta's new home just in front of the one that had been demolished during her eviction. Everyone helped and it was encouraging to see a community united in a common task.

At around 2:30pm, when the house was ready to be roofed with iron sheets, we were alerted that a contingent of armed police was about to arrive. We quickly briefed everyone to stay calm and to wait and see what they said. In less than 5 minutes a police vehicle with headlights beaming sped into the compound and, before it could stop, armed police officers jumped out with guns blazing, throwing tear gas into the crowd and sending us scampering for safety.

The whole village was filled with tear gas and small children could be seen choking from the gas. Several people were injured but this did not deter us from pushing our campaign agenda. We quickly regrouped and discussed a way forward. We agreed to send three representatives

The whole village was filled with tear gas and small children could be seen choking from the gas.

to seek an audience with the armed officers. I led the team carrying the court orders and other legal papers that gave us the mandate to be in the compound. In our discussion we were clear that we were not ready to leave unless by a court order. The crowd was getting agitated but we managed to ensure everyone adhered to our non-violence discipline. The power of cooperation was at work.

After long hours of negotiations, the police officers were obliged to leave Mama Zepreta peacefully in her home. Since the villagers had been angered, we requested them to leave at the same time as the caretakers for their security and to reduce the risk of

violence. Work resumed as the women broke into song and dance. The crowd was determined to finish the house before sunset. By 6pm the house was roofed and we prepared to leave. Everyone was overjoyed that we had succeeded even after being threatened and intimidated with guns. It was proof that non-violence can be more powerful than weapons.

In the days that followed we engaged with the authorities. We visited the Police and District Commissioner's offices, seeking clarification as to why the law was being applied selectively. We learnt that they had never been informed of the General Service Unit, the unit sent by the Police Commandant, operating in their jurisdiction although this was against security protocol. It



was obvious that the Commandant was using his office, power and state resources to bend the laws for his own gain. We recorded statements about the incident. We requested that the Provincial Police Officer set up an investigation and for appropriate action to be taken against this abuse of power.

“When the birds are alive, they eat ants. When the birds die they are eaten by the ants.”
– Times and circumstances change, so does life.

The Kenya National Human Rights commission (KNHRC) visited us. We took them to Mama’s home to confirm what had happened and they later visited the authorities to seek clarity. We made it clear that the rule of law must be followed regardless of status. The court ruled that Mama Zepreta be allowed to stay on the farm as that was her home.

We showed that non-violent strategies can address injustices in our communities. A violent approach could have led to more violence and further injustices. Many people want to know more about these strategies and sharing this story will help the movement to grow.

What can we learn here?



This story is about two communities, a community of people who have come to believe that non-violent action can address the injustices of the society in which they live, and a geographical community that saw an injustice committed but felt powerless to address it until they saw a different way of tackling the problem.

What enabled change to happen?

- A co-ordinated approach using the principles of non-violence which broke a vicious circle of violence which always results in increasing oppression.
- Planning and preparation.
- Bringing like-minded actors together.
- Drawing on what is available – laws and regulations, people’s dissatisfaction.
- Leaders who ensured that discipline was maintained and principles followed.

But something deeper was going on too. Through the commitment of a group of people who could offer a clear way forward, doubt and fear were replaced by faith and courage. The leaders spent time talking to people and understanding them, and helped them to see that change was possible. The non-violent approach was respectful of the people on ‘the other side’, recognising that they were doing their job and helping them to see how they could do it better. It is this deep work that really made a difference and it was supported and upheld by the non-violent principles the group adhered to. And this one change can lead to many others as communities see what can happen if they work together to address injustice in a non-violent way.

It was proof that non-violence can be more powerful than weapons.

Working for change transforms us

Finally, here is a story that is still evolving. On the surface it is a familiar story about a community fighting for its rights. But it is also about learning and growing through struggle.

Creating Electricity

Mandlenkosi Gcwabaza

The Electricity Action Group (EAG) is a network of mainly female community activists in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, campaigning for access to affordable and efficient electricity. EAG was started by three women in 2009. Since 2011, it has campaigned for free electricity for the poorest households. It is supported by an NGO called PACSA in a way that is 'on tap not on top'. EAG operates in 10 communities and the agenda is set by its members.

Msunduzi municipality has the second highest electricity tariffs in the country and 45% of its households are headed by a woman. Typically, households have 6-11 members, often with only one wage earner.

At the beginning of the campaign in the Msunduzi Municipality, EAG conducted research to find out how much free basic electricity was enough for poor households. They organised round table discussions with officials from different municipalities and Eskom (the electricity supplier), business people and political organisations to present the research findings. Msunduzi municipality council then took a decision to give 200kWh of free basic electricity to all residents. This decision was greeted with joy by residents, especially the poor.

Unfortunately, the Municipality only gave free basic electricity to credit meter users but not to pre-paid meter users. Members of the EAG and pre-paid users were angry. At a subsequent meeting EAG members began asking critical questions that reached beyond their initial demand for free basic electricity. The group asked, "what does it mean for us to not have electricity' and 'what is democracy really?"

People were forced to choose between electricity and food. If they bought food they could not cook it, if they bought electricity they had no money for food. The original purpose of pre-paid meters was to serve poor citizens, but now they would be forced to pay more than those who had credit meters. At their meeting, the EAG members concluded that the Municipality was playing games with people's lives. The critical questions they asked made them realise that in a democracy they did not have to ask for, but could demand their rights. They decided to challenge the Municipality about their



inability to provide free basic electricity to pre-paid meter households.

They wrote letters and emails to the Municipality but these were ignored. They held a 'sit in' at both the Mayoral and electricity department offices and were given promises that they would "look into the matter". One week later the Municipality announced that they would issue letters asking people with pre-paid meters to apply for free basic electricity.



EAG called a meeting and the message was communicated to all members. They copied the letter and distributed it in the community. They used print media and community radio stations to inform pre-paid meter households. On registration day the lines were long and the electricity department did not have enough staff on duty. EAG members managed the lines and distributed drinking water. People were given only four days to register. When they argued that four days were not enough, the Municipality promised to give people another week but reneged on its promise. Households were promised that within two weeks of submitting an application they would receive 200kWh electricity free of charge. Months passed and nothing happened.

At a special meeting EAG members decided to take action until they got what they wanted from the Municipality. They developed a strategy and plan of action. This started with picketing outside the Municipality and electricity department offices. This yielded no response and after two weeks they organised a march to submit a memorandum. The chief demand was for the immediate implementation of 200kWh free basic electricity for households with pre-paid meters in line with the council's October 2010 resolution and national policy. They asked that council representatives be accountable to citizens and that real spaces for substantial dialogue be opened up in the city. They also demanded that electricity be provided to all households who as yet had no access.

The march was supported by the South African Communist Party and COSATU (The Congress of South African Trade Unions). When they arrived the Mayor was not in his office and another official was sent to receive the memorandum on behalf of the Mayor. They refused to hand it over. EAG organised another march and demanded that the Mayor be there to receive the memorandum. The authorities refused to grant permission for the march so they approached human right lawyers who issued the municipal authorities with a letter demanding they grant permission or they would take the matter to court. Permission was granted.

EAG members continued to mobilise residents, especially those living in informal settlements who had no access to electricity. On the day of the march the police re-routed the march to the municipal buildings and when they arrived the Mayor refused to see them since they were early. They were told he would not come out until the right time as outlined in the permission document. They waited outside singing until he came out. He promised to look into the matter, the standard response from authorities but again, nothing happened.



EAG approached the public prosecutor, but he failed to facilitate any meetings with the authorities.

Meanwhile people had already started to steal electricity by setting up illegal connections. This caused deaths, many of them children, but these were ignored by the Municipality. EAG was unable to stop people setting up illegal connections because life was so difficult without electricity. EAG decided to train volunteer electricians to re-connect people when they are disconnected.

EAG succeeded in reducing the electricity tariff by 3% by presenting their case to the National Electricity Regulator of South Africa. This was a small victory that encouraged them to continue the struggle.

The free basic electricity matter is currently being handled by lawyers. EAG is an organization that believes in action so it continues to put pressure on municipal officials. They plan to lobby Eskom and the Municipality to invest in renewable energy.

The struggle of EAG in Msunduzi is a struggle for human dignity and not just about 200kWh of free electricity. When they started speaking about what was behind the demand for electricity they saw that it was about dignity, humanity and justice. All people must all have access to services because services are intrinsic to dignity. Nobody must be denied access to services because they are unable to pay. They believe that people must come before money and leaders must be accountable to the people they serve.

They are now organising around this campaign, which is about dignity, about love, humanity and justice. It is about everyone having electricity, water, decent toilets, frequent refuse removal, street lights that work, decent schools, enough and nutritious food, good quality health care and safe and reliable transport so that all people can live in dignity.



Some questions to think about:

What, in your minds, are the real challenges here?

What would you suggest if you were there?

This is a story of working for a change that has not yet come about. But the community has, in the process, learned many things and started to address the challenges that face them proactively. They have been given a voice and space where they air their concerns and grievances and feel they are working actively for change. They have seen their problem as part of a larger problem that affects the whole country. This sows the seed for connecting with others in the same situation.

Finally.....


Many development organisations work to bring about change in communities. We are designated as community development workers or community facilitators and we mobilise community health volunteers, community-based organisations and community groups. Reams of paper have been filled on how to work with communities, how to empower, mobilise and change them. What can we say that is new? Do all these stories have things in common that will help us to understand how social change happens and how we can support it?

Hannah Arendt has said, in reference to the Arab Spring, that in order to bring about a revolution, you need to change not just your way of thinking, but your way of relating.

In the stories we can see how people worked to change relationships in order to bring about change. In the library story, the people who wanted change started talking to people who were homeless, who had been excluded from society. By bringing everyone affected by the library closure on board they not only had more people supporting them but they changed the dynamics in the community. The change could have stopped at saving the library, but the relationships which were formed through working together for change affected many other aspects of life in the community too.

In Mama Zepreta's story, the church group reached out to the boda boda union and the people in the market. They gave them tools which enabled them to work together and there was a common cause. They also developed a different relationship with the local authorities and the legal system. Because they were informed about their rights and the law, they were able to engage with them and overcame attempts to subvert the law. Access to information was important here and also a few people brave enough to use the information to bring about change.

In the kitchen story, the change that some community members were prepared to make brought about changes in family relations. They changed the status quo which is why the change was such a huge step for people and one which many were reluctant to take. Why were they prepared to do this? There was a will to change because the price of not doing so continued to be high. In the past, malaria was probably thought of as inevitable, something that they had to accept. The initial government intervention and awareness raising helped them to understand that they could prevent illness and deaths from malaria. By engaging different members of the community in raising awareness and using drama and games, more people were able to see that bed nets could benefit them. This 'critical mass' of awareness and understanding helped some people in the community to believe that change was necessary.



... in order to bring about a revolution, you need to change not just your way of thinking, but your way of relating.

In the electricity story, again the process of change brought about a change in relationships. The relationships with the electricity company and with the local authorities are still antagonistic, but the relationships between people in the communities have changed. Acting collectively led them to involve more people in decision-making and to do things for themselves rather than to wait on others. The movement has evolved over time but they have not yet been successful. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is that they were not been able to change their relationship with the local authorities and the electricity supply company. Perhaps a different strategy – of seeking common ground and compromise – might work better in this situation.



“ So a change in relationships can be a catalyst for and a result of social change.

So a change in relationships can be a catalyst for and a result of social change. It can set in motion a chain of events that leads to people who would not normally speak to each other meeting together. It can change the power dynamics between actors, even in family and personal relationships. This suggests that the very act of bringing people together to interact with each other in ways that encourage people to move outside their comfort zone and interact with people who they perceive as different can be a way of promoting and supporting social change. People need time and space to talk about what they want to change and how.

Intergenerativity, one of the leading causes of life, is about respecting and appreciating what has gone before and what will come after. In practical terms, it suggests that movements for social change benefit from being inclusive of the old and the young. Bringing different generations together gives access to both the experience and historical knowledge of older people and the enthusiasm and idealism of the young. These are of course generalisations – there are of course young people who have a lot of experience and older people who are enthusiastic. Acknowledging this, rather than stereotyping is also important.

Cultural norms are important here. While young people could raise awareness in Vietnam, it was the more senior people who needed to make the change if the rest of the community were to follow. Mama Zepreta was vulnerable because she was old but people also rallied round her because of her age and vulnerability. Understanding the dynamics between the generations is important. Projects that focus on ‘target groups’ often ignore the need to involve people from different generations and different groups within the community. People who are vulnerable or oppressed within a community can gain a lot of strength from meeting together and working for change, but if they can engage other groups to work with them then change can be more long-lasting and avoid exacerbating an ‘us and them’ mentality.

Crucial to all attempts to change relationships and to involve people in social change are time and space. Time to talk and a safe place to meet with others are important elements of the stories. Sometimes communities can find time and space themselves but often outside agencies can provide this – either directly or by providing the funding to make it possible. The community in Vietnam needed more than one meeting to get to the point where some people felt able to change where and how they slept. The communities in South Africa need regular meetings and events to keep the cause alive and to support each other.

The stories also demonstrate how people working together for change need to learn and adapt. If they fail to achieve the change, they need to reflect on what they have done and why it has not worked. Change happens in the process of working towards a goal. As people are working towards it, they learn to trust each other and hatred, fear and doubt are gradually replaced by love, courage and faith. The real work is developing the will to work for change and the courage and faith to see it through.

The real work is developing the will to work for change and the courage and faith to see it through.



Working with Questions:

What is our Primary Role as Development Practitioners?

People have to be seen as being actively involved, given the opportunity, in shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs.

– Amartya Sen (1999)

Most Development Aid Projects unthinkingly dump capacity-building, technology, and funding, onto communities, mobilised around the idea that people lack capacity, resources, and organization. Highly-planned, logframed, capacity-building Projects. And in doing so they further bury the hidden reservoirs of community potential.

And of course in burying what people already have and know and bringing answers and resources from the outside, inevitably people's own will, confidence, and ownership are also buried and the projects continue to fail to sustain themselves once the capacity and resource bringers leave. Failure is blamed on the same incapacities and people are left worse off than before. This is the grand narrative of the Development Aid Industry.

We must recognize that people were developing long before Development Aid came into their lives and will continue to develop long after it leaves. The will to develop is innate, inborn. It is an inside-out and a continuous process. It may not be happening in a healthy or productive way in this or that community and it may be that its potential is blocked or buried by a series of constraints, but it is the only game in town to work with.

Development is already happening and as an outsider I cannot deliver development to anyone or indeed bring change to anyone any more than I can eat for them or cough for them! People can only change themselves. Any change that is forced on people is likely to be unsustainable or unhealthy.

In the Letsema Program we support the rural women's groups to bring their leaders together for five day workshops. These are not training sessions but development sessions where the women are encouraged to tell their life stories, to listen to each other, to experiment with asking better questions, to inquire into the power relationships they are caught in, and to build trust and solidarity between them. There is very little teaching, just the odd concept or two, and no fixed curriculum.

The workshop moves as the women suggest, increasingly facilitating themselves and setting the agendas. They are continually encouraged to reflect on themselves, to draw strength, forgiveness, and learning from lives that, without exception, are filled with experiences of hardship, trauma, sacrifice, initiative, and triumph. In a few days they start to look at themselves and each other differently, each a bit taller, their eyes filled with hope and courage and their minds with new ideas. Do we have the patience and faith to support and let people to find and learn from each other in their own way and time?



... people were developing long before Development Aid came into their lives and will continue to develop long after it leaves.

Working with Questions:

What is our Primary Role as Development Practitioners?

By **Warren Feek** of The Communication Initiative Network

Guidelines for supporting people from the outside

“Can you please help us to develop a strategy, plan a programme, review some work, write a document, critique a situation, solve a problem...?” I often get these kinds of “can you please help/support” requests, whether from a member of a local community group or a leader of a major international organisation.

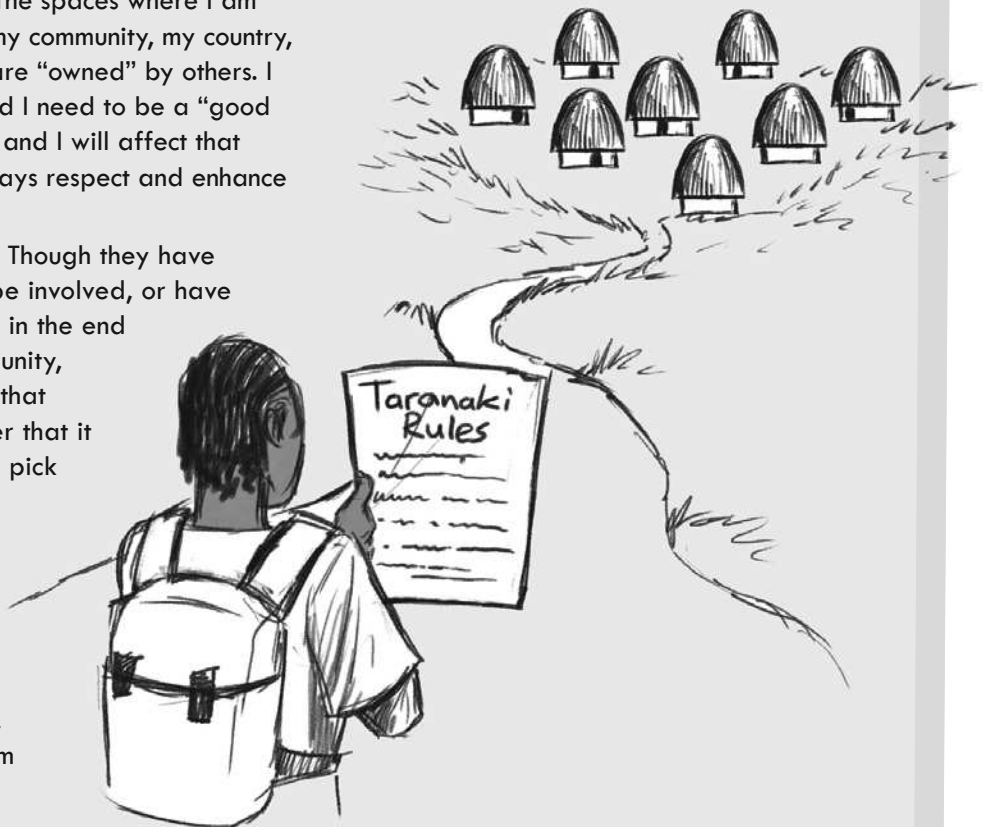
But being put into the position of outside helper I can easily do more harm than good. As the centre of gravity of local, national, and international development moves to more local and national decision-making and control, the numbers of such requests are also rapidly growing. With this there are also more requests for peer support, with a priority on South-South support and co-operation. The world is asking for more collaborative learning and working approaches. And less for top-down expertise.

And so, I have developed a set of 10 rules that I seek to follow when in a “please help/support” situation. I call them the “Taranaki rules” after my home province in New Zealand. Many of them are grounded on small community contexts, and experience. Of course I break the rules below all the time. And each time I do so I kick myself and try to learn from the experience!

“The world is asking for more collaborative learning and working approaches. And less for top-down expertise.”

The Taranaki Rules

1. The “I am a guest” rule – The spaces where I am engaged are usually not my community, my country, or my organisation. They are “owned” by others. I am there as their guest and I need to be a “good guest”. I am in their space and I will affect that space, and so I should always respect and enhance that space.
2. The “I get to leave” rule - Though they have very kindly asked me to be involved, or have accepted my involvement, in the end I get to depart that community, country, or organisation - that space. I need to remember that it is not me who will have to pick up the pieces afterwards.
3. The “90/10 knowledge” rule - No matter how much I may think or be told that I know about a situation, issue, dynamic or problem, I can only know a maximum



Working with Questions:

What is our Primary Role as Development Practitioners?

of 10%, while the “locals” know about 90%. Often this knowledge is hidden or not valued. This applies to even the most technical of topics. So, I try to create space for the authentic surfacing, valuing and peer sharing and examination of that “local” knowledge.

4. The “10% talk” rule - If I am talking more than 10% of the time, I am doing a really poor job (and I can talk!). If I dominate with “my knowledge” I close the space for engagement, sharing, learning, and creativity, and I begin to undermine rather than help.
5. The “4 out of 5 are questions” rule - Questions open up spaces for engagement. As an outsider I may be able to ask some different questions that open up a process – questions that create space for new or different understandings or relationships. So I try to ensure that my questions outnumber any specific ideas or statements I may share by a ratio of 5 to 1.
6. The “marginal voices” rule - As an outsider in a process I am less hidebound by pre-existing dynamics such as who gets to speak most or whose opinion carries the most weight. Trying to change the dynamics in the space means respectfully encouraging the quieter, “less important” voices to surface and be acknowledged.
7. The “would you mind sharing your story with us” rule - My culture places high value on getting down to business as quickly as possible, but this is not always a good way for an outsider to work. So I try to create time and space for people to share their stories. It is amazing what even close colleagues or neighbours do not know about each other. The inclusion of personal elements creates a closer and more meaningful space for understanding and working with each other.
8. The “5 year” rule - People struggle to look past the day-to-day problems, opportunities and worries, and to have a long term view. When it feels appropriate, I ask everyone to outline where they want to be in 5 years related to the priority issues on the table. This is an attempt to raise the group’s gaze and direct their actions to longer-term solutions rather than just fighting fires.
9. The “when to share my ideas and proposals” rule – I get invited to give support because I am regarded as having some technical knowledge and expertise that can be helpful. Everything in rules 1 to 8 above works against that happening! So I have a dilemma. My rules for when to share my ideas and proposals revolve around: being asked at least 3 times by 3 different people; being substantively into the process that is underway; having sufficient time left for my ideas or proposals to be critically examined; and, being able to explain them using the analysis emerging from the process to date. Timing is critical.
10. The “what agenda or plan” rule - If you are 25% of the way into a support/help process and the opening agenda or plan is still being followed – well, that is not good!

These are just my views, what guides my attempts to support others. What do you think?