Empowerment Strategies for Developing Communities: Utilizing Existing Faith-based Infrastructures for Community Development

These past several months have been challenging globally as the impact of Covid-19 on global health, travel, social distancing, not to mention the economic impact, has brought individuals, families, communities, nonprofits, and government entities to their knees. Throw in natural disasters, political upheaval, and continued global conflict, and one may readily see why developing new and innovative empowerment strategies to best impact local and global communities for long-term sustainability has been critical.

Affecting Change International (ACI) has developed a partner organization called The Unfinished Task Network (UTN). The motto of UTN is: *"Dignity Now; Hope for Eternity."* We seek to make that a reality by equipping local churches to become bases for community transformation. These churches already have connection to the community and in many cases are already providing a sense of identity, have a message of hope, and have a mandate from their faith to care for not only the widows and orphans, but the community at large. In our particular faith context, UTN's calling is to equip churches and church planters to initiate living, thriving, prophetic communities of faith that embody the Good News of God's mission in words, deed, and character in their own specific contexts.

For too long, the global church has appeared irrelevant to the challenges and needs in the community. Church has been seen as a place to attend on Sunday for singing and preaching, but to address real needs in the community, villagers either turn to the government or non-government organizations. While acknowledging that the church is an imperfect institution, churches are the organizations with greatest potential to reshape the lives of the communities where they are located.

We work to equip a church planter or pastor to lead the church to see its mandate to reach out with an integral mission to the whole person: body, soul and spirit, and to be prepared to act within the community as well as from the church base with a real understanding of the need to empower and develop people—offering a hand up rather than a hand out. In turn, we train the church leadership to think positively about how the church disciples, empowers, and develops people and communities, how it uses its resources, what challenges it faces, what it says "no" to (what it will not do), how and at what levels it engages with its society (who it partners with), and how it determines root problems and solutions. To this end, we utilize what is called Asset Based Development.

Asset-based development focuses on what people have rather than what they do not have. It doesn't ask them what they need. Asset-based development recognizes that God has blessed every person and community with gifts, such as land, social networks, animals, savings, intelligence, schools, creativity, production equipment, etc. An asset-based approach puts the emphasis on what people already have and asks them to consider, "What is right with you? What do you have that you can use to improve your life and that of your community?"

This approach to community development reinforces some very positive relationships:

- Relationship with God—God is seen as just and that He has provided for us.
- Relationship with Self—God has given me talents and gifts; being able to work to take care of the needs of my family and others gives me dignity.
- Relationship with Community—Shared resources, shared intelligence, etc., improves our relationships with our neighbors because we are working together.
- Relationship with environment/creation—I have resources I can use; the community is valuable and has resources.

In our research, we have identified different ways of involving the community, in increasing levels of effectiveness:

1. **Church working for the community.**

Least effective is when the church does the work itself, leads the process and makes decisions on what work the church will do in the community. Community

members are there as beneficiaries only but, have no involvement as decision makers nor do they sit on the committee. They are passive recipients.

2. Church working with the community.

The next level of effectiveness is where the church works closely with the community to affect change. The church begins as a facilitator and mobilizer of the community. Together, the church and community members form a committee and work to bring change in their community. The work is still done by the church and sits under the church leadership, but community members sit on the committee with church members, and together, they decide how to move forward.

3. Church working as a catalyst in the community.

Ultimately, the most effective is when the church is envisioned to get involved in their community. They mobilize and envision their community to get involved in transformation in their community. The role of the church is not as implementer; however, the church still plays a key role as catalyst and can also be involved in the work of the community. The church, therefore, plays a prophetic role in speaking into their community and getting people to transform their community, even as they release the work out to the community to do. The church's primary role is as a catalyst, with members from the church involved as community members in the work.

Our research from Kenya has indicated that the more the community is involved, the greater the impact on the people targeted; the wider community and the church grow both numerically, developmentally, and spiritually. This is because when the church reaches out and walks in real relationships with others, people come to know the living, life-giving God. Also, as church members connect with more non-believers, their faith is also strengthened and challenged.

For UTN and its' local partners, this process starts by gathering both church and community leadership together to understand the following:

1. In the current situation, what is the community struggling with and what needs to change? For example:

- What could we do about food insecurity?

- What could we do to assist widows and orphans?
- How could we strengthen families?
- How could we promote safe drinking water, adequate housing and food, health services, garbage and sewer systems, and decent roads?
- What could be done about the education of children and adults?
- What could we do about alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling and other addictions?
- What we do about spousal and child abuse?
- What could we do to improve relationships between people?

From the discussion, what is the issue needing to be addressed first?

2. Identify what resources are available in the community to resolve this issue.

Make a list of available resources. Include the identity of the person or entity that is the steward of the resource.

3. Distinguish truth from lies in ownership of resources. An example would be the lie that the community is lacking or doesn't have the ability—we all have unique talents, skills, and ability. Using all God has given the community, transformation can come to community. Discuss what other lies are prominent in the community. It is critical to start to recognize all that God has given both the church and the community.

So often we listen to the lies and believe we don't have anything. We compare ourselves with others and are only able to see what we don't have. Now we must look again to see all God has given us.

4. Form a work group from the church and the community. Develop regulations and a structure to guide this. Avoid people with personal interests; find people with the right heart and passion, people of peace in the community.

5. Involve the community in sustaining the work. Involve them from the beginning. Build relationships with community people. This can be done by visiting homes, having an open house in the church or sharing a meal together.

6. Listen to and appreciate the views of the community.

7. Involve the government. This is important so that when any difficulties arise, and they will—the government knows the work, and there is a relationship built already.

8. Don't compromise your ethics, integrity, or your witness. It is perfectly acceptable to have criteria for personal behavior of the work group members.

9. Implement the project in the community.

10. Since God brings growth when we sow seeds, even small seeds, explain that we'll use a new name for small-scale projects: 'Seed Projects'.

Definition of Seed Projects: They are very small-scale projects that are carried out by the local church and that demonstrate God's love to the people in the community and possibly to other churches that have not yet caught the vision. They are for the community and can be completed in a relatively short period of time. It is important to emphasize they must be short-term projects that benefit others and not the church.

Some Seed Project examples: a church-based community garden, community clean-up, cleaning a local water source, building a local house for a vulnerable family, organizing a feeding program for the most vulnerable in the community, conducting a one-day feeding event, planning and an awareness campaign (for example—good hygiene, proper sanitation, etc.).

It has been a pleasure sharing with you what Affecting Change International and The Unfinished Task Network are doing to make a positive difference in our world. I hope our example of asset- based development is an encouragement to you to look at using the existing faith-based community around the world as part of your development strategy in the future.