

How Many People Make a Community?

There is a new trend in International Aid policy. Aid will be applied to “community projects” and will no longer be granted to individuals. Grants to aid a single person’s efforts, such as a grant for an individual’s fees for schooling, are out of fashion.

I run a charity which sends kids to school in Kenya and holds 3 environmental awareness workshops a year with them. We get the kids at the end of primary school and carry them through to secondary and most recently university. So kids who don’t otherwise have the means go to school. And they get to meet up regularly to learn about environmental issues which affect them. They meet one and other and us, the trustees, regularly – they are orphans and have no parents to advocate on their behalf.

Let me tell you how we work. We have a group of 10 kids we started working with 6 years ago. We set up as a UK charity with a local branch in Kenya where we have one full time paid branch manager and 2 paid workshop facilitators for the workshops. Our Kenyan manager, Maurice Odiwa, has been with us since the start of this programme; in fact he was instrumental in developing the structure for the programme. Standing on the corner of the street in Migori his rural town he said to me “Kir, I don’t care if the structure for our programme comes from Japan, I just want a structure that works!”. After 4 years of conversations and failed attempts at creating first a tailoring centre and second a computer centre we settled on traditional sponsorship within a workshop structure. Maurice has the local knowledge and provides the trustees with the cultural bridge we need in order to actually reach and help this group get to school, stay in school, attend the workshops, articulate and develop ownership of their education. Once a month Maurice travels to see each child (the 10 kids are spread out over the province of Nyanza in different schools) to see how they are getting on and to address any needs to be met in order to help them stay the course. He was the one who identified the children we took on the programme and knows intimately the obstacles that they are likely to face along the way. Nothing works without him – he has his ear on the ground and we regularly discuss all decisions. The kids now have a peer group that they can call upon, and they have Maurice, the facilitators and us the trustees in their world as an additional group of individuals interested in their well being and success. And they have another focus – the environment – from which some of them have been inspired. For example, after visiting the recycling centre one pupil started a recycling programme at their school; after visiting the Mara with us, the children gained an insight into the beauties of their country rarely afforded to rural children and the imminent importance of conserving wildlife before Kenya loses something that is irreplaceable. Six years ago the average grade for the group was 55%, it is now 65% and 2 have gained university entrance. Academically, the children make good progress despite grave handicaps.

Recently I called up the director of education at one of the major grant making charities to see if we could get some funding. I was told straight off that they will not fund any school fees as part of any program. It is a new policy. I did ask how they spent the monies they have set aside for “educational purposes” to which I was told they do

community projects – “because they can’t pay for every child’s education in Africa they have decided instead to fund “community” work”.

I think the reasoning goes something like this: funding community projects ought to increase the financial well-being of a community and in so doing ought to provide more means for more families to send their children to school. Past problems cited in funding individuals is that in choosing the individuals eligible for the support, the funder creates dissonance in the community. Choosing who will have from who will not have their school fees paid creates an unfair selection process in the community thereby creating a divide between those that have and those that have not.

These are valid concerns and let’s look at them one at a time.

1. Funding community projects (as opposed to individual endeavors) ought to increase the financial well-being of a community, and in so doing provide more means for families to send their children to school.

I did a “community project” in the early days of my work in Kenya. We started a computer centre which worked for about 1 year. I sent computers over by boat and paid the customs officers to clear the shipment. We set up shop and offered training programs to all ages. The electricity would go on and off periodically but we managed to run fairly smoothly for the first year. Our idea was similar to recent trend thinking – that in increasing the income of the community (that is for some of the adults) benefits from these efforts would trickle down to their children and perhaps the community at large. And then money went missing from the till and computers were actually broken in order to pay the service repair persons’ repair fees. There was, in short, a lot of sabotage of the centre by the people who were directly benefiting from the centre.

To this day and after 10 years of experience working in Kenya I cannot say that I really understand why adults benefiting from an endeavour sabotage it. Perhaps it is because immediate needs are too pressing and the temptation to take from the till or damage the equipment in order to call in the relative repairman is too great. One thing I have noticed in the work I have done with the children and adults in holding workshops and sending them to school is that there has not been yet to date any sabotage of the work by either the children or the adults. That’s 6 years later.

The problem of funding community projects is that you cannot be certain that the funds will be spent as envisaged; nor is it at all a given that if the project is successful that profits will be spread around the community to meet anyone’s education needs. In fact how you trace where your funding goes and what are the benefits or spin-offs of that project, assuming that it is successful, is in itself not a simple nor obvious task.

Community projects can be tricky to evaluate. What are the goals of community projects and how do you measure whether they have been successful? And at what point? For example a well might be installed and the locals benefit from drinking water but whether that ever translates into any direct benefit for educational purposes is difficult to measure.

And when do you evaluate the project? The well might be working for 6 months or 1 year and then breaks down and spare parts are never found. Or after evaluation the parts of the well might be stolen and the well no longer continues to work, but because the project has already been evaluated it is counted as a success when in fact it ceased to function soon after the evaluation.

After the failure or sabotage of the computer centre we decided to work directly with the children to ensure that they were actually receiving an educational benefit from our efforts. It is by no means self-evident how to work with a group of adults who have their own interests and agendas which more often than not are not shared or are not necessarily obvious until things go wrong. And adults have already a view of the world, their culture and their experience that they bring to any endeavour. Whereas children I felt had a more flexible view still open to other ideas and doing things differently. Perhaps being able to accept goodwill is easier for a child than an adult.

Our aim in supporting them through secondary school is to enable them to have more options to support themselves and their families than they would otherwise have. We aspire to get them to the stage of being self-supporting members of the community.

There is a counter argument here for individual sponsorship which goes something like: when an individual benefits from a sponsorship and gets employment they contribute back to the community in various ways sometimes including paying fees for needy relatives. If community projects have as an aim educational purposes then it is not altogether clear to me that community projects are necessarily any better (or in fact might be less effective) at supporting educational goals.

2. Selection of individuals to fund creates dissonance in the community (as opposed to no (or less) dissonance created through funding community projects)

In funding community projects, as opposed to individuals, the funder still has the problem of dealing with the local adults in choosing who will be involved in the project and who will benefit more directly from the funding. Community projects also involve a selection process, individuals will be chosen to participate and benefit more directly than others. However a selection process is made, whoever gets to benefit from either direct sponsorship support or as participants of a community project – both involve choosing individuals who will benefit from those who won't. Therefore dissonance in a community is introduced by a foreign funder both in funding individuals and in funding community projects.

In either case dissonance is created and needs to be managed. In our case we regularly review how the larger community is viewing and being affected by the work. For example, after discussions with Maurice it emerged that the caregivers were ignorant and suspicious of the trustees (not an uncommon problem) and so we paid for and invited them to attend one of our workshops. They were given a chance to voice concerns directly with the trustees and with Maurice. A typical complaint might be that a sponsored orphan looked after by extended family gets a better education than the

children of the extended family, since they cannot afford to go to school, and the extended family loses a member of the family workforce back on the farm. (More commonly in our experience the orphan is left to stand on the side of the road selling peanuts.) Nevertheless these are sensitive issues which are both practically and emotionally difficult to deal with, and needs must be addressed with the greatest of tact and sensitivity.

Whatever structure a project assumes dissonance in the larger community will be created and needs to be addressed. However, to assume that to shape intervention as community projects avoids disrupting a community is perhaps naïve. Any source of foreign currency creates an incentive to game the donor, and creates winners and losers and can disrupt local relationships, care and commerce.

3. The community versus the individual

What do you need to make a community? What are the indicators that you have a community? How many people make up a community?

We run workshops with 10 kids and 3 adults and 3 trustees, and 14 regular supporters. That's a total of 30 people working together on a specific endeavor. Is 30 people enough to make up and speak of in terms of a community? It might be. Do they all need to reside on a daily basis together or can we also speak of this community of individuals spread across Kenya, UK and Canada as a community bound together by a common endeavour. We come together 3 times a year to hold week long sessions looking at environmental issues which affect Kenya in the first instance and the world generally. Our resident Kenyans now speak of having a peer group which they did not have before. Is that not a community? Arguably our structure might fit both definitions of "community project" and "individual" endeavours.

It gets difficult to use these words like "community projects" versus "individual sponsorship" without actually looking at who is involved and what is being tried to be achieved and then asking in what kind of structure are these individuals organized and acting in their endeavours? At the core of any project, whether it is called a community project or a project aimed at individuals is the work being carried out.

As someone working in Kenya originally from the developed world one of the most noticeable aspects of the cultural experience is the very different prioritization of community over the individual – I think it is fair to say that the culture is broadly speaking more communitarian in its outlook and less individualistic than the Western world. In general terms Kenyan society and its networks of patronage and power are all about the community. This can be wonderful – the sense of enfoldment of inclusion into African life is evident from the first time you get off the plane; you are greeted by warm friendly smiles anywhere you go which is refreshing to anyone who has spent their life in a Western city. People feel obliged to help out their extended families and all resource is distributed for a plethora of never-ending health and educational needs. However there is another side. When these communities clash, their members have little option to stay

aloof from the conflict; and the choice of leader is usually given to those most willing to support the existing kinship or tribal network. A more sinister aspect of the communitarian nature of Kenyan society is that individual achievement is often constrained by incomprehension or envy. What we know of as the “tall poppy” syndrome can run riot, and anybody who stands out is apt to be a target for rumour or malicious gossip. Where we in the West tend to applaud individual achievement, Kenyan rural society can often perceive it as a threat to existing networks and relationships.

For these reasons any attempt to support individual achievement has to support individuals through the instances where he or she may come into conflict with existing groups, family, tribal, religious obligations or even classroom squabbles. This has to be done with tact and understanding, under the advice and guidance of a Kenyan (in our case someone like Maurice and our facilitators) and in the knowledge that anyone who brings resources to the community, however widely or narrowly it is targeted, becomes inevitably a source of possible patronage, expectation and hope, and potentially can run foul of “aid entrepreneurs” and earn the anger of those who may have got their hopes up and find them frustrated or not realized.

At Activation Trust we create a community network that supports individual achievement in difficult circumstances.

In my view, a key element of success is the creation of a strong group by creating long-term relationships over years which can weather occasional disappointments and upsets by reason of trust and successes built over time – perhaps away from the more professionalized and project based model that the larger agencies seem to often use, where workers on rotations are more the common method.

In summary

Let’s not lose sight of examining what is actually being done in the endeavour. What is it that these people are doing together, is it working and then how do they organize themselves? How can we tell whether or not it is working and when do we evaluate whether the work being done is beneficial to those who are involved directly and those indirectly touched by the work? How do you know if you have done it, when do you evaluate an endeavour? What would provide evidence that what you are doing is working. How much does it have to work to be considered to be working? These are questions that need to be asked.

Labelling work as a “community project” as opposed to an “individual programme” is not getting at finding out whether or not a project is working. Any work funded by a foreigner will create some dissonance in the community in which the work is being carried out. That dissonance needs to be addressed and negotiated in the community not used as a bar for not doing something that might be working rather well. Whether community projects actually achieve their goals and whether a project is claimed to be effective at increasing educational goals needs to be evaluated not just at completion but

yearly after the termination of the project as my experience showed that the work can be sabotaged at a later date by the beneficiaries of the project themselves.

Currently in some of the International aid world “Community” work is in and “individual” programmes are out - outdated, old thinking and old fashioned. I’m sure that there are good reasons to embark on community projects and that some of them achieve some of their goals. I am not an expert in International Aid, but I do have some 10 years on the ground experience of having built a structure that is delivering some of what it claims to deliver.

Working overseas in a foreign country to promote education is not a simple task with obvious guidelines. I by no means have the answers as to how to best go about this work. However I am concerned that some of the International Aid world is not examining the effectiveness of an endeavour at meeting its goal and the worthiness of the project because it may not at first sight carry the label the grant-making charity is looking for. I hope that I have persuaded you, the reader, to ask the deeper and simpler question of whether an endeavour is working, based on what evidence and for how long. If you can answer those questions to your satisfaction the endeavour may be worthy of your support.

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