

Avoiding Dependency Through Appropriate Community Development

by Stephen Saint
Indigenous People's Technology & Education Center

Mistakes and failures in the area of community development are more abundant than we like to admit to each other while true successes are more rare than we admit, I suspect. Both offer an opportunity to learn. While preferring to dwell on the positives, I will use both to try to make several points that I believe are worth considering under the theme of "dependency" and community development.

ISSUE ONE - SOLAR POWERED PUMPS EQUAL COMMUNITY UPHEAVAL

Years ago, while living in Africa, I traveled through an isolated area of the sub-Sahara where I noticed frequent solar powered community well pumps. My initial reaction to this clean efficient method of providing communities with a certainly much needed resource was positive. I was intrigued. Being new to the local culture, I was surprised to hear that this development program had created substantial upheaval in the communities where the powered pumps were used instead of the hand powered pumps which usually were installed to alleviate the work load and sanitation problems of traditional walk-in wells. In this particular area of West Africa women have a relatively low standing. Their lives are spent caring for their children, animals and their frequently less pressed husbands. Drawing water from the community well each day frequently entailed waiting in line for considerable periods of time. Rather than adding to the women's burden, however, this time provided their only regular respite from the taxing rigors already mentioned, and the incessant need to pound millet. Hand pump wells were effective and efficient in meeting a real need. The solar powered pumps went too far. They were disruptive, and when they broke down, they were beyond the local technical and financial ability to repair.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Community development projects should be designed to meet the actual community need rather than the perceptions of the benefactor.
2. Local people to take over the development program and to fund it, as well as to maintain it, in the long run. It isn't surprising that the women in some communities in which we worked were pleased when the solar pumps broke down (if there was someone to replace them with hand pumps). I suspect that even the men were pleased because the old adage seems to be rather universal that "if mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy".

ISSUE TWO - HUAODANI STORE

One of the first mistakes I made when I went to work with the Huaodani was to give Huaodani teenagers rides out to Shell Mera on the edge of the jungle when I had empty

space going out to bring in supplies or recovered patients. I thought offering the extra seats which cost me nothing and saved the young people days on the trail were a good way to build rapport with them. Finally several of the older women objected, much to my surprise.

They began to tell me some of the problems these young people faced outside Huaodani territory. Without money, the young women often became involved in casual prostitution. The young men frequently carried money to make purchases for other members of the tribe. They were easy prey for their contemporaries on the outside who pressured them into activities such as drinking, and then left them to pay the bill. When they no longer had the money to make the purchases they had been commissioned to make, they were embarrassed to return home, compounding the problem.

I immediately agreed to only fly those members of the community that the Christian elders approved or requested. Realizing my remorse gave the elders and olders the courage to tell me that they needed a distribution center or store within their territory. (I use the term "olders" because there is very little formal structure among the Huaodani people. However, older people generally are given special respect and I found it more and more appropriate to hold myself under the authority and be accountable to older people among the Huaodani.) Their conclusion was that they wanted and needed a distribution center where they could buy the necessary items that frequently prompted young people to make "shopping" trips to the "outside world". So, we set out to build a store.

I received plenty of advice from outside about how and why such an undertaking would fail, but I committed myself to do what local people asked me to do. So we gave it a try. Fortunately, I was very busy making the flights they requested in our little duct-tape reinforced, borrowed bush-plane so I didn't get involved in building the store. I realized later that they considered the store much more theirs than mine for having built it themselves. My role was simply helping to stock it.

I did realize that someone needed to actually own and manage the store. I also realized that this individual would come under substantial pressure to extend credit and show favoritism, and would also be tempted to exert the inherent power the store would give, for personal benefit. I asked the elders who should run the store and they wisely appointed one of their own. They also appointed a younger helper who was more nimble with math. Everything hasn't always been smooth, but four years later, the store is still functioning with its own capital.

I never could quite explain the concept of "percentages", as in "we should expect a 10% - 20% discount when we buy in quantity", and "we need to add on 20% to cover the cost of flights to bring merchandise in and to cover spoilage". But we overcame that with a small Japanese solar powered calculator and formulas printed up on the order forms. Many older members of the community have no money and buy salt, machetes, axes and other necessities by trading artistry. Unfortunately the missionary family who sold these fascinating curios (blowguns, spears, net bags, hammocks etc.) was transferred and we are now looking for several new outlets for the products overseas.

CONCLUSIONS:

1. **Don't exert influence until you understand the state of affairs or have true accountability to the people.** One of the greatest demonstrations of trust and affection I receive from the Huaodani is knowing that some of them will actually tell me when I'm wrong or headed in the wrong direction. When a development project doesn't make sense in the local context, it is very easy for the local believers to become dependent on outside input. If they don't understand and own the objective or see the destination, they must be led.
2. **Let those who know, decide!** There is no appropriate substitute to turning over the greatest amount of authority at the earliest possible time, from expatriate Christians to the local church. They might make mistakes, but we KNOW that we will. There are some key lessons that cannot be learned without the actual risk of possible failure. Both sides tend to have an aversion to the risk of failure, but it is part of the maturing process. The longer the transfer of responsibility and authority take, the greater the likelihood of dependency.
3. **He who builds it, owns it!** There are other examples that would better illustrate this, but I hesitate to miss the opportunity to point it out here. This is a lesson that is difficult for us North Americans to control. We love to build things for others and inadvertently end up "owning" churches and schools and other facilities that the local believers would be much better off truly owning. "Tenancy" in someone else's facility is a common form of dependency.
4. If you don't let local leaders make local decisions, BEFORE you feel they are quite ready to, several things happen:
 - a. If we don't let them start making decisions before they are quite ready, they probably never will be ready! We tend to think others are ready only when they are as "ready" as we are. That is why we give out diplomas in our society. Otherwise, when would a surgeon be ready for his first solo? The chief surgeon would never let him loose, and we would certainly never let him try on us.
 - b. We end up making all the decisions ourselves if we wait until those under us are as capable as we are. Local believers grow dependent and seem lazy, and expatriates grow weary and insensitive.

ISSUE THREE - THE HURDLE OF CULTURE

I am going to detour from the specific topic of community development to deal with an issue that impacts this, as well as all other mission efforts that bring people of disparate cultures in close and extended contact with each other.

When I was a boy I had a fat wheeled bike and was very content with it; until, that is, several friends returned from furlough with mid-width tires on their bikes. Our society of M.K. boys quickly divided into two camps. You got it - we became the fat wheel gang and the mid-wheel gang.

Now, if the width of one's tires can drive a wedge between life-long bosom buddies, is it any wonder that people who look different, eat, smell, and dress differently; who have a greatly differing sense of humor and different standards of cleanliness, modesty and privacy; who aspire to different goals and measure wealth and status differently; who treat their spouses differently and perhaps even have a different number of them - on and on and on - is there any wonder that we should find that these differences that we casually lump under the heading of "culture" tend to divide us.

When I once asked the Huaodani to show several visitors how to climb a tree with a climbing vine, they were perplexed. They could not imagine that fully-grown foreigners actually didn't know how to do something that every Huaodani child seems to know instinctively.

On the other side of the fence, when an old warrior named Mincaye came to the United States for my son's graduation, I had to show him how to use a faucet - hot water on the left and cold on the right. He didn't think in terms of "right" and "left" so we settled for turning both on and then turning different ones down until the desired temperature was reached. Then, after giving him an extended explanation about how foreigners standardize - allowing cars to drive in opposite directions at terrifyingly high speeds on the same road, for instance - the next bathroom he tried to use had a single lever faucet. When he mastered that we ran into the shower faucet where cold comes first and then hot, as you turn it further on. Mincaye came out of the shower a changed man. His beautiful olive complexion had been altered to a dull cherry red.

Finally, we visited Orlando International Airport. In that bathroom Mincaye was scared by the automatically flushing toilet. He came flying out of the stall and assured me that he no longer wanted to "go". He only wanted to wash his hands. But, when he tried, there were no faucets at all. Cowodi (foreigners) kept walking up to the counter and washing their hands, but Mincaye couldn't figure out how they were turning on the water. Finally, with a bewildered look on his face, I saw him walk up to the counter and stick out his hands. Bingo, the water came on! The wonders of the "foreigner's" world never cease.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Culture and its widely differing views of the world, including value structure, traditions, and language, form a huge barrier to comfortable human interaction between people groups - whether for evangelism or community development.
2. To minimize the effect of this barrier and the resulting frustrations and dependency it fosters, I make the following suggestions:
 - a. Take as few people across the barrier as possible to get the job done.
 - b. At the earliest possible time, and with great care, look for opportunities to achieve the interactive goal by bringing members of the "receiver community" over the culture barrier rather than members of the "taker community". I believe it is worth considering that it is easier for an indigenous person to impart a

- new belief appropriately into their receiving culture than it is for an expatriate to appropriately export it. I believe this is true just as it is easier for bilingual speakers to translate from their second language into their first, rather than the other way around.
- c. Keep the necessary interaction between the cultures, where one is dominant and the other subservient, as short as possible.
2. For "takers" who must cross a cultural divide:
 - a. Conform to the host culture rather than trying to change them to be like you.
 - b. Constantly evaluate what you feel moved to teach or do for its cultural appropriateness and especially for the host culture's perception of it.
 - c. Identify with the people you are called to serve, spend time with them, invite them to your home and spend time in their home

Christ has called all His followers to a radical new culture where the greatest are least and the last are first; where the leader serves, and you die to live. The more we conform to His culture, the more alike we will all be.

One Sunday in Ecuador, I saw a donkey tied to a tree next to a Mercedes. In a country that would not allow a world class tennis player, Pancho Seguro, to play at the Quito Tennis Club because he was half Indian, only the Gospel could unite hearts from such opposite ends of the economic and social spectrum.

We must remember that God has called us to take His message and His love. These concepts are inevitably encased in our cultural up-bringing. It is the "shrimp" Christ wants us to share and which the people are hungry for, not our special spice covering. If there is one area where we must die to self in the effort to obey Christ's Great Commission, let it start with divesting ourselves of our culture.

ISSUE FOUR - DENTISTRY

Two of the more radical projects the Huaodani asked me to help them with were an Indigenous dental program and the acquisition and mastery of their own airplane.

Let's take a look at the dental project first. A visiting dentist spent three days in a Huaodani community just over the ridge from where we lived. He and his outside helpers worked diligently to fix as many teeth as they could before the plane came to whisk them away. They had a plane load of equipment, fuel with oil for their two-cycle lighting plant and fuel without oil for their four-cycle air compressor. Their effort seemed like a wonderful gift to the Huaodani who have very poor teeth - at least from an outside perspective.

When they left, however, the Huaodani were frustrated and even a bit angry (dependency causes real pain). They told me it had been three years since any dentist had been into

that community. "What about all of those who walked the trail to get their teeth fixed, now they just have to walk home with their teeth hurting" was their complaint.

When I asked them what they wanted, they replied immediately that they wanted a dentist to live with them. I tried to explain that no dentist would come to take care of just them. "You teach us Babae (my Huaodani name), and we will do it ourselves", they countered. And that is what happened. A Christian dentist from South Carolina came to the jungle and offered his services to the Huaodani. They accepted on one condition; that he would teach them. He agreed, and I flew him and his pastor into our little Huaodani center.

I left him in the care of the Huaodani and took off on some errands that the elders asked me to do. When I came back, the dentist informed me that someone in the village already knew how to "prep" teeth. I assured him that he was wrong, but he insisted. He had left a young girl in the old barber chair we had set up on the bank of the river, after giving her novocaine. He had gone up to our house to get himself something to drink and a bit of shade. When he returned, Mangadi's teeth were expertly drilled and ready to be filled.

After some detective work I figured out that Tementa, one of the elders, had drilled her teeth. He had no previous experience, but he grew up learning how to do things by watching others do them and he is very good with his hands, as are most Huaodani.

"If he could do with no experience what I couldn't do until my 2nd or 3rd year in dental school, these people shouldn't be pulling teeth, they should be fixing them", our dentist friend asserted. I agreed whole-heartedly but had no plan to make it possible. This kind dentist offered to teach me so I could teach the Huaodani. I guess we might call that developmental discipleship. The Huaodani Christians see dental service as a way to meet a real "felt need" of their own people. They also see it as a great door opener that can enable them to earn an opportunity to teach their patients how to walk God's trail.

As a result of their interest and some professional's willingness to break from the traditional mindset that it takes so many years to learn to fix teeth, this door opener can now be available to indigenous Christians all over the world. In fact, an entire ministry has been started as a result of the Huaodani's desire to be equipped to reach their own people through dentistry.

I-TEC, (Indigenous People's - Technology and Education Center) has been developed to help train and to equip local believers with the tools they need to be able to take up the task of evangelizing their own peoples. This is where the missionary effort should leave off.

Just as money usually surfaces as a problem in creating dependency, the lack of appropriate (learnable, affordable and maintainable) technology usually plays a major role in prolonging it. It is hard to pass the "baton" from missions to the Indigenous church when it consists not only of the Gospel which the people have mastered, but also includes

computers, airplanes, radios, print shops, medical services and more complex and expensive tools that they usually haven't.

CONCLUSION

1. It can take decades of formal education to fly airplanes, operate computers and fill teeth, but it doesn't need to. If we will use some of our financial resources to develop affordable and appropriate tools for our lower tech brothers and sisters and, if we will discipline ourselves to use them too, the transfer of responsibility and authority for evangelizing thousands of people groups can be handed over to local churches much earlier. The myth that "universal education" (learning how the entire body functions in order to understand teeth, and learning how to do all aspects of tooth repair before specializing in extracting wisdom teeth) is required to properly master specific tasks, is a major dependency creator in the short term and frequently continues to the long term.
2. It is important to remember that scaffolding should be just as temporary at the building site of each new church as it is at every new construction project. When we plant the Church with technology that indigenous believers cannot master, then we will oblige ourselves to build it for them or we will have to abandon the effort, and will frequently see it fail. Dependency!
3. In Ephesians 4, we are told that Christ gave spiritual gifts "for the equipping" of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ". I believe that this should also be the central and primary theme in development efforts; to equip the (local) saints for the work God has called them to and for which He has uniquely gifted them.

SUMMARY

I would like to go on and discuss the airplane project that the Huaodani have worked so hard for as well as many other projects on which we have been working. But time won't allow and we might detour from the central topic on which I was asked to concentrate. More information is available on our web site at www.I-TECusa.org.

I believe that development programs should be a means to an end, and should not be allowed to become an end in themselves. I do not advocate using development or medical services or technology transfer simply as "bait". They are a luxury that we could better leave to our unsaved counterparts unless we have a plan to use them in meeting people's "felt" needs in order to meet the critical spiritual needs that they may be unaware of.

Shakespeare said, "life is but a walking shadow that struts and frets his HOUR on the stage, and then is seen no more". We who have the hope of eternal life know that this life is only the opening exercise. Meeting physical needs has become so compelling and popular that it threatens to take an inappropriately prominent place in Great Commission efforts. Just as in the emergency room at the hospital, we must force ourselves to remember that the cuts and scrapes and broken bones of our patients must be attended to

only after terminal injuries have been taken care of, unless they are strategic to getting at the real need.

In conclusion, the Huaodani have paid for everything that they have acquired during my time with them. That includes the solar panels, clinic, outboard motor, store goods, pharmacy supplies, radio studio, two-way transceiver, dental equipment and even the airplane that we built together. They only have a fledgling economy, but they are clearly growing in fiscal maturity. They are willing to take financial responsibility. They first haven't known how, and consequently didn't realize that they should.

Steve Saint
Indigenous People's - Technology and Education Center
3708 SE 4th Street
Ocala, FL 34471

E-mail: saint@i-tec.org
Web Site: www.I-TECusa.org