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LESSONS OF COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IN INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

When it comes to international development, and more specifically rural development, effective partnership is of the utmost importance. The procedure for effective partnership should be streamlined, and should be aimed at involving and engaging the community partnership regardless of what service is being provided. From recent projects in various countries in Engineers Without Borders, I have compiled a series of vital lessons relating to developing and maintaining effective partnership with our most important stakeholders - the community in question. First, the community must have trust and a direct stake in the project's success to ensure longevity. Second, the scope ought to be carefully set via a rigorous baseline study and managed through effective communication. Finally, an effective communication strategy must be constructed that adequately manages the community's technological limitations, and cultural and language barriers.

Keywords: Rural Development; International Projects; Sustainability; Effective Partnership; Community

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INTRODUCTION

In 2006, a major initiative to improve water access gained traction by various people, including celebrity icons like Jay Z and former presidents like Bill Clinton. They pledged millions of dollars to install approximately 4,000 pumps throughout the African continent. Several years later, a UNICEF investigation revealed that the pumps were

rusting away, underutilized, and misused (Hobbes, 2014). This story of global development describes an unfortunate reality of global development projects. When there is little effort at the grassroots level, and problems are solved through generic efforts with mismanaged partnerships and failed communication, projects also fail. In addition, when projects are implemented with a top-down, domination approach (Eisler, 2003), the lack of mutual respect precipitates the failure of innovative projects.

Each year, the United Nations reaffirms its commitment to reaching its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which include the mitigation of global hunger, various diseases, and establishing an environment of equality and equity (United Nations, 2018). Many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) follow these SDGs as guidance, and formulate effective solutions to resolve them. However, at the root of the solutions to these problems is not proper motivation, but proper implementation. In this paper, I seek to present an antecedent to a manual on effective implementation, based on the lessons learned from a project in the developing world relating to partnership.

STREAMLINING THE APPROACH FOR EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIP

Effective partnership is vital for any successful development project. However, partnership manifests itself in many forms, particularly in the context of international development and rural development projects. Partnership, by definition, involves a process of give and take, and mutual respect (Eisler, 2003). When working with communities that have valuable needs to be met, it is very important to be cognizant of what is being taken from and given to the community in question. Because many of these questions place project teams in moral abstractions, it's essential to have a streamlined process. The process followed by our team in Engineers Without Borders (EWB, 2018) can be used as an effective model to improve the outcome of partnership (See Figure 1).

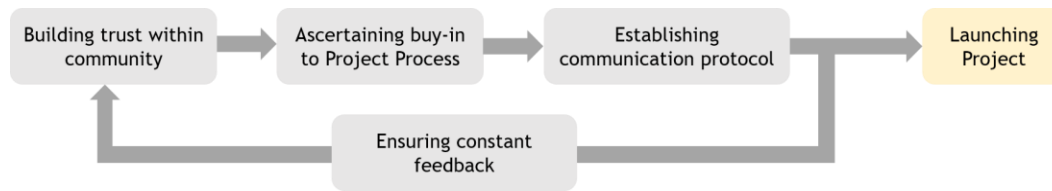


Figure 1. Streamlined Partnership Process Prior to Project Launch

To briefly summarize the streamline process shown in Figure 1, the process for effective partnership starts with a sustained effort to build trust within the community, by meeting formally and informally with community leaders and members. After this process of familiarization with the stakeholders of the project, it's important to gain community buy-in. Community buy-in for international development may seem unneeded. For many philanthropic cases, it is perceived that the community is solely a beneficiary of the project. However, buy-in is necessary for the sustainability of the project. In short, buy-in ensures accountability and engagement in the project process. Finally, it's important to establish a thorough communication protocol.

Communication flows both ways in true partnership (Esler, 2003). Communication protocols must be planned to avoid any delays in information, but also must be adaptable to accommodate the needs of the community. Once the communication protocols are established, the technical aspects of the project can be considered with a constant consideration for feedback relating to any issues that may place the partnership in jeopardy. In my experience, partnership challenges often place a greater toll on a development project than an actual failure in technical design. If the technical design fails, but there is a sound strategy to maintain trust, ensure buy-in, and continue ongoing communication, projects still have the opportunity to rebound and succeed.

The value of community buy-in

In my first project in Yulo, Bolivia, the community played a major role in the development of the project. After our team's first meeting with the community leaders, we were encouraged by the deep interest they took in the planning and design of the

project. There were even examples of disagreements between our project team members and the community members about the design and the execution of the project. While conflicts are often seen as an obstacle in the execution of a project, our team used it as a metric of the engagement of the community. Partnerships view conflict as a source of growth rather than a challenge to be suppressed (Eisler, 2003). Our partner community members were engaged because they had a very important stake in the project. They had spent their own time and resources in the middle of a busy farming season to help us with construction, in addition to volunteering their homes and buildings for planning, our housing, and meals. While they provided little or no monetary compensation for the service we provided to them, we were using other intangibles they provided to us which ensured their vested interest.

From experiences like this, I discovered that the most important part of the project process occurs before the technicalities of the project, in steps that earn the trust of the community members we had partnered with and buy-in to ensure their engagement, not only during our stay but to ensure the success of the project in the long run.

Community trust is vital, particularly in international development projects. Many of the communities that need assistance with development are marginalized in many ways, typically distrusting groups that claim to provide the same resources promised by their own governments. Additionally, development groups and projects from the United States can often be viewed as colonial and condescending. This originates from a history of western imperialism and exploitation of indigenous populations, and must be considered carefully when attempting to develop the groundwork for the project.

To address this challenge, we found several steps to be effective. First, it was very important to communicate our gratitude for the community's hospitality, and let it be known that the team was there at their pleasure. We also found it effective to document customs, including the language and style used in greetings, and protocols for respect. How did young children speak to parents? How did young people criticize

elders? What were the relational dynamics between the village elders and the members of the community? We found that making the effort to learn the local language was also a highly effective way to improve trust. Furthermore, involving the community at all stages of the project ensured the maintenance of trust.

Though the development of trust is an ongoing, dynamic process, there is a threshold to be met, which must be gauged based on the community's engagement in the project. If the community views the project positively, and there is smooth and seamless communication between the project team and the project process, the project can then move on to the next stage of determining buy-in.

The value of buy-in cannot be overstated. A brief synopsis of human psychology tells us that we are more likely to care about something when we invest something of value to obtain the product in question. For rural development projects, it becomes a daunting task to ask for something in return for the delivery of the project. Many rural villages that need development are marginalized and have sub-par quality of life or below average income. It may be challenging to approach a community in this context, and even more challenging to set aside our preconceived notions of philanthropy and charity.

However, the benefits of obtaining direct community buy-in far outweigh the challenges. First, it ensures the sustainability of international projects. If the community has a vested interest in the project's success, they are more likely to maintain any project implemented, and follow up with necessary maintenance and repairs. Second, it promotes input from the community at all phases of the project process. This community input allows the project team to gauge the dynamic concerns of the community. If the community does not contribute to the project in any way, they are less likely to communicate new concerns relating to the project. Some commonly used methods for community buy-in that do not include direct monetary contributions include the provision of materials, labor, transportation (if the project involves several

different sites), and housing. While some of these may be monetarily trivial, projects should consider allowing communities to offer their hospitality. However, they should also know that the expectations for a successful project also escalate with increase community interest.

The need for scope management

The unfortunate reality is that human needs are never ending. In order to position our project to have the best chance to succeed, it's important to have the scope well defined. The scope of a project is the range, or perhaps more importantly the limitations, of needs the project will address. For example, the scope of a water distribution system project will be to disseminate water from an existing source to a locality. However, often in the project process, teams may feel the need to modify the objective, either increasing or decreasing the breadth of resources provided to the community. To ensure that this adjusting is done in an effective way that ensures success, scope management tools are essential.

We encountered this barrier during the Bolivia project. Part of the Bolivia program for our Engineers Without Borders team was to revitalize a source which piped water from a spring to a community that was seven kilometers away. Our assessment of the system showed a structurally sound infrastructure of the catchment system dam. After communication with the community, we agreed that we would build erosion blocks upstream that would slow the flow of water to the catchment system. This would mitigate damage to the catchment dam and thereby improve the longevity of the system. After we returned to the United States, we began designing the blocks and purchasing the equipment necessary.

However, after experiencing the rainy season, the community decided that they needed an entirely new dam, a project that our group was not prepared for. The requisite reset of the project was simply not feasible, and the travel date was fast approaching; resetting the project would require a dramatic restructuring of the timeframe, and

required flexibility that we could not provide. As a result, the project stumbled, and ultimately failed.

A major reason this occurred was the continuing nature of the needs of any community when a proper baseline is not established. Baselineing a project at the outset is a meticulous task not performed by many project teams, specifically in rural development. With various barriers to obtaining all the requisite information necessary to make informed decisions, projects may be constructed on faulty assumptions about critical components of the project. Performing a robust baseline study and rigorous surveying of the community prior to starting the project reduces the likelihood of dramatic changes in the scope of a project.

In any baseline study, it's very important to convey to all stakeholders the limitations of the project, and to set realistic expectations. For people who come from entrepreneurial backgrounds, their first instinct may be to oversell the project. This always is detrimental to a project, as the goal of a development project is to ensure that the service provided is effective first, prior to ensuring that the project team has some internal benefits. Second, it's important for a project team to understand the limits of a community, particularly involving the construction costs of the project. A project may require 40 people to assist with construction, which may not be feasible, given local dynamics. Gauging the availability and mobility of community resources, including materials and people, allows the project to be based on realistic goals. Finally, any baseline study should evaluate the status quo, and attempt to quantify any needs and gains. Failure to provide necessary quantification for need metrics leads to the inability to track progress, which may directly affect the scope of the project.

Dynamic communication for development projects

Lack of effective communication is a major reason why any projects fail, especially international development projects. Style barriers and language barriers dominate the communication challenges that our various projects face internationally. Style barriers

refer to the styles of communication prevalent in the area. For example, not all rural parts of the world have cell phone access, or access is expensive, a major barrier to effective communication. If a project includes documents in the communication process, knowing the limitations and capabilities of email and mail are essential. To address such issues, it may be in the best interest of a project team to hire an in-country non-governmental organization (NGO) partner to help with document exchange and facilitate calls with the community. An in-country NGO may also assist in overcoming language and cultural barriers.

The most important lesson our projects taught us was to include the cost of communication first in our budget documentation. Planning for effective communication strategies ensures the longevity of the project, but also creates an environment in which trust is more readily maintained. More important than the mode of communication is the communication plan. The community members are the most important stakeholders in any rural development project. During our first trip to the community, our priority was to identify “must-include” individuals in the communication plan; we worked with our NGO partner to set up calls with these individuals on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. During these calls, we would update progress made, and gain awareness of any substantial changes to our baseline. For instance, if a severe weather event changed the topography of the land via flooding or erosion, our project team would need to know about this problem to adjust our design. This responsiveness is only possible with frequent, regular, standardized communication protocols.

FUTURE PARTNERSHIP PRIORITIES

Global development is obviously important, but projects cannot continue solely based on ideas. They must be grounded in pragmatic solutions. International development projects have too much at stake to fail. The approach must be systematic, and completed with consideration of known pitfalls. Partnership is easy to conceptualize,

but challenging to implement in practice. There must be a commitment to relationships based on mutual respect and multidirectional communication. Effective partnerships require empathy and flexibility, but also meticulous planning for effective communication and execution.

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