

NGOS IN CHANGING SOUTH AFRICA, ARE WE EMPOWERING OR DIS-EMPOWERING?

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When your twelve years old child is stuck trying to solve a certain problem say in mathematics, say it has to do with multiplications, and he comes to you for assistance, which way do you approach empowering your child – see table below ‘dis-empowering way or the empowering way’.

OR

Disempowering approach

You look at the sum and you tell your child right at the beginning what the problem in the sum is?

Ask for his view around what the solution is, then after dismiss his opinion/ideas, jump towards telling your child what you know and see is the problem?

Do you ignore his attempts and approach of solving the problem, take the pen and workout the solution for the problem and give over the answer to your child?

As the child continues to attempt finding solution to the problem, as he makes mistakes along the way do you belittle your child by telling him he needs training?

If and when you feel your child is slow in understanding and in progressing with regard to finding the solution, do you get impatient and do the sum yourself anyway?

Ultimately you grab the pen and do the multiplications yourself, give the child your correct answer and tell him to go show the good work to his teacher?

When you have found the correct answer yourself, maybe came to learn from your child that you were correct, do you celebrate to your friends that your child is passing mathematics?

Empowering approach

You ask your child to share with you what he sees and thinks is the problem in the sum

You workout with your child and clarify and agree around what the problem is by asking as many helpful questions as possible which the answers will enable your child to understand the problem in the sum

You ask your child to test his approach for solving this problem, along the way check what he is doing and maybe what else he is not doing, and provide advice ‘how about if you tried it this way . . .’

You positively stroke his attempts and help him understand that it’s okay to make mistakes, You avoid in every possible way to destroy his confidence in his ability to find solutions even in future attempts.

Your role becomes that of a facilitator. You become as patient and understanding as possible, you help him test various options and strategies for solving the problem. You understand that if you do it good this time, you are avoiding to find yourself doing it in details again in future

You leave the pen in his hand always, you make every effort that the solution is found by him as he has to show the teacher and himself and other people tomorrow at school how he came to find this solution.

You work on ensuring that he finds the correct answer and method of getting to that

answer, the results 'pass' at the end will place you in a position where you can confidently celebrate that your child does master mathematic problems.

I would definitely go for the second block "the empowering way" if I was to help my child, not only in mathematics but also with regard to any issue about life and the millions of questions that requires a human being to try solving. If there is any one from the NGOs who agrees with me on the model / approach above, then lets ask ourselves, including myself, why then when we work with communities, why do we do it differently? Why do we dis-empower them?

Why is it then that when we work with communities:

- **when we get to areas where people live, often if not in all cases, we come in and right from the beginning know and identify what their problems are?**

Often we say those factors in their environment we see, we identify them as problems and somehow maybe is because we have an agenda that we bring along. We have to be seen to be working, nowadays only a few of NGOs are really really into the business of wanting to help people, many are more into the business of wanting to help themselves and secure funding.

Often what we have seen and come to conclude to be the problem, in not. Again maybe we have been taught to believe that in communities when we come in what we HAVE to identify are problems, so that we can find projects to respond to those problems. What if every community was to say to us, NO we do not see ourselves having any problems. Would it mean we are out of business. That's another topic on its own, the point here is right from the beginning when we enter we dis-empower the very same communities we said we are going to empower when we ourselves identify what the problem is.

In the most improved South African vocabulary, almost everyone is passionate to death (especially in the NGO sector) around the word consultation 'we were not consulted / government did this on its own and want us to rubber stamp, they did not consult us'. Yet we ourselves do little consulting when we get into communities. When we conduct community profiles / research / base line study, whatever we may call it, and we come out with results indicating what problems are there in communities, without even sharing the results with the very same communities, when we come out with results and propose solutions for their own problem without even asking them to work with us 'the participatory way' to analyze the results of the exercise and together design ways in which these problems can be solved, we are not consulting either.

- **Why is it that when we try finding solutions for the problems in those communities, we ignore and dismiss (tactically) people's own ideas and we jump towards telling them what we have as our own ideas for solving their problem**

Normally we are the ones, we 'outsiders' are the ones who come in and propose projects that people can implement to solve their own problems. When we ask them what is the problem, and they say to us ' we do not have work we are poor', normally we are quick to propose that a sewing project / bakery project / broilers projects will enable them to generate income.

Oh! Above all that we are the ones who always places a carrot next to our proposed idea, such and such department or such and such institution has funding and can help them. Obviously people who are in desperate need of income right now, would go for a project that you propose because you have insight to helping them even access financial support to start that project.

Less do we consider and attempt to count ‘ people who are going to be involved in the project I propose, are they having any long-term objective with broilers? Is this what they want to do for the rest of their lives? Do they have any experience in even feeding chickens except the conventional home-chicken feeding experience?’

Less do we consider and attempt to count, ‘people who are around and are saying they are having problems, what talents and gifts do they have that they can use to try to solve these problems? Do they realize the wealth of brains carrying brilliant ideas amongst themselves? Do they cognize and want to use those talents and gifts and implement those brilliant ideas they have? – Mr. Molemela, owner of the Bloemfontein Celtics Football Club had an idea and went for implementing his idea of driving around selling coal in the streets and today he is one of the prominent business people in Bloemfontein.

- **Why is it that we ignore their attempts and approaches, we ourselves workout details of ways in which the problems that we have identified can be solved?**

Normally when we come in, because we know what is and what is not funded by whoever, we take away the pen from their hands, we take away the power from them, and take it upon ourselves to develop the business plans for them. We tend to ignore that we came to them, it's not all of them who comes to us for help. Also we tend to ignore that in as much as we found them struggling, they were still very much alive. They have been finding their own ways of getting by and living through and surviving those hardships and struggles thus far! We come in and just by ignoring their existence ‘thee source of power’. We take away that power of solving the problems away from them. Sometimes we even go beyond and name/label them as ignorant; helpless; disadvantaged; poor of the poorest; the list is endless’. It is that naming, which they also tend to accept and internalize, that takes away the power from them and places somewhere else e.g. government/private sector. Surely there is little that can be mentioned with any community having had succeeded using only what they have and know for solving their problems, there is a need sometimes for outside intervention and support, but not totally being depended on that intervention and support. We normally make them to be very dependent on that intervention and support.

Little do we recognize and value their own daily efforts of surviving and finding their ways through whatever problems. Little do we do with regard to helping them celebrate their existence and what they have been doing so far. Little do we encourage them to improve what they have been doing, which basically is what they know best, they have designed it and have come to master it, it has worked for them till the day we came in.

As much as we intended good and well with the training and information and support we bring along, most of the time we impose it on people, without even counting if they need it or not, or maybe they only need part of it to help them progress further. By thinking that what we have is what they need – in most cases we share with them what our packages contain and failing to take into consideration the fact that the majority of them are people who have little or no exposure to formal education which obviously implies that anything that comes their way they'll take as long as it brings some form of documentation ‘certificate’ – in most cases it is that excitement from them around what we bring that normally we use as an indicator that they really need our training. Little do we often do with regard to helping them differentiate between want and need, and to go for need, then when they have the chance and resources later can satisfy the want.

Barney Pityane and others in the book ‘Bounds of possibility’ suggests three very fundamental values that should inform any action we take in communities:

- a) **Affirm people's existence:-** meaning finding a “concrete way of saying to people that they matter because they are people”. The point being made is that people who have

known nothing but scorn and humiliation need symbols of hope to lift them out of despair and to empower them to liberate themselves.

- b) self-reliance:-** meaning that the conceptualization, direction, implementation and evaluation of any initiative should be by those it was established for

- c) self-confidence:-** meaning that people are aware of their own knowledge and skills, also they are encouraged to exhaust their strengths and work on their weaknesses. People at the end of an intervention are confident in themselves, their ability to think and their capacity to initiate and implement.

- **Why is it that when we feel they are slow in grasping and understanding around progressing towards where we wish them to be with regard to finding the solution toward their problems, do we do it for them anyway**

Normally when we work with people in our communities we tend to ignore the fact that they have been schooled (formal or informal) to believe that they are less than. What happens is because we work for organizations and also we are little better able to communicate in English than most of them, they tend to shift the power to us and look upon us as messiahs who have all answers to their problems. When such power is ascribed to us (spoken or non-spoken) we fail dismally from being tempted to taking that power. An example is when they find some difficulties in one thing or another and they look upon us for solutions, we are too quick to provide those solutions. The intentions are good from our side, yet the effect is they will always look upon you to bring solutions to them every time they encounter a problem. If we were always keeping it somewhere at the bag of our minds that someday we won't be around, we are there for a short space of time, they have to be on their own ultimately, then we would always ensure that every time no matter how small the problem seems, it is important to always throw it back to them, you'll be there to help them sort out what they can do to solve that problem. That is empowering!!! If we can help them to rely on their ideas and approaches, if we can affirm their own efforts and encourage them to test them, and our role is more of 'being there and advising along the way', in future when they call unto you, you have good grounds to state 'but you remember how you solved this and that problem with your own strategies, I did little, you were the ones who did it – try banking on your own ideas again, I'll be there to help you, but you should start first'. And that is true empowerment.

Doing it for them anyway, no matter what our reasons are; maybe they are slow, maybe they can't read or write, maybe they are lazy, maybe they are ignorant, maybe they are not well vested with latest developments; what ever our reasons, doing anything for them is dis-empowering. It takes away that power from their hands.

- **We do grab then pen, do the multiplications our self, give them the answer and tell them to go show it to the teacher**

Often we come in and develop the business plan for them – we are so good in doing this. We take the business plan form along to them, ask them questions and fill in the forms with their responses. Most of the time the only thing they know around the project we want to recruit funding for is only the name of that project OR that the project will help them sell chickens and make money.

Often we take them along to who ever we are approaching for supporting this plan financially or otherwise and we present the idea as a 'community owned project'. We are no longer afraid nor ashamed to insult the very same people we say we want to help. We make people a laughing joke under the pretext of community development and empowerment. They are not aware of it, all that excites them for buying into what we do is that 'there will be something started that will help

them generate some income at last'. We do, we are very much aware that its not their idea, it hasn't been worked out with them – they have absolutely no idea what the details of the business plan contains or what the words written there means, they have no clue at all.

One project in Wepener in the Southern parts of the Free State Province was established for unemployed women. These women were assisted by one of the development officers to establish a chicken/broilers project to generate income. Their names were collected, a constitution was drafted, their IDs were collected for verification. Every detail of what is required for accessing money was adhered to. Their Business plan succeeded and the project was started.

A month or two later these women sold half of the chickens that have grown, made some money and shared the money amongst themselves. The development officer who helped them from the beginning, come to check how the project was doing, and was told that there is no money to buy food for the remaining chickens. She came to learn that people paid themselves salaries from the income they made with the chickens they sold. Hell broke loose!!!! The officer instructed those women to sell the other remaining chickens they did not sell so that they can make use of that money to buy food for the next bash of chicks. Further more the officer informed them that according to the business plan submitted, no member was going to receive any salary at least until the project was three months old. These women knew nothing about this stipulation. They only became members of this project because they wanted to earn an income and they wanted to earn that income right from the first month of their work. Had they known of this condition, maybe they would have decided not to be part of this project after all. The fault here, amongst many, is not because they were in a hurry to get an income, it's because they had no part in deciding around the details of the business plan. If they had been part, they would have maybe agreed amongst themselves that the first month of their project won't pay them salaries, so for them to make some income they'll do something aside to generate some money whilst waiting for the second or third month of their projects' delivery.

- **Why is it that we claim empowerment, self-confidence of people, success of people when we know those are our own work and our own success.**

Normally we do things for them, take them along everywhere we go and place them next to us to verify that they are really involved. Any success that comes out of everything, we celebrate 'people are empowered' whilst we know very well its us who has been doing all the work. Its us who have been filling in forms, getting them registered, recruiting funding, writing letters to so and so for this and that, demanding sites from municipalities, e.t.c. If we were gone and no longer with them, and if we were to ask the very same group of people we placed in front of the world and shouted 'people are empowered', if they were asked to do the very same thing over again, I doubt if they would do it, if they did I doubt if they were going to succeed like the first initiative did. Because we did it, they didn't do it and we labeled it 'people are empowered'.

Empowerment takes time and process and money and everything, the above is the short route and the very most dangerous route. The route we propose in this paper is very long, but it is worth. In the long run, it's a job well done, it is true empowerment.

This is what we propose if you want to have meaningful-long-lasting impact:

- Agree with people first on the intensions of the base line / research / community profile. Agree with them what we are interested in finding out; e.g. if its an NGO rooted in the Early Childhood Development field, it would be very interested in finding out what the state of life is around young children be it at home, in pre-schools or in the community at

large. Convince them to agree to participate in the process, i.e. to provide you or your researchers with information to questions you have

- We both agree (us and them) that at the end of the research / base line study / collecting community profile, we are both going to sit down and analyze the results of the process. We are both going to sit down and identify what is it that every one (individuals/groups/institutions/whoever is around there) has been doing so far to try solving this or that problem? What is it that they have managed to achieve? What is it that had intended to achieve? How have they been attempting to achieve what they intended to achieve? What works for them and what is it that inhibits them from achieving what they had intended to achieve? What ideas and plans have they brought together to try doing more of what they have been doing? What is it that they have that they had used to achieve what they intended achieving?

- Then later we go back to our training and information and support and experiences and we draw out ways and approaches we can use to help them identify, NOT US IDENTIFYING, but HELPING THEM to identify what else they have not been doing which could have been helpful to achieve what they had intended to achieve. To help them identify and recognize what else do they have, which either they have not been using or have been undermining; which they can use to help them achieve what they had intended to achieve (Even great Jesus when his disciples came to him and said people are hungry, he asked his disciples . . . 'what is it that you have with you'. The miracle maker, the most magical person as Christian history teaches us – he who could just instruct and things would happen - - he did not undermine what is there around, instead he increased what people had)

- Then at the end ultimately we help them plan in details (NOT US PUTTING THE PLAN TOGETHER FOR THEM – WE HELP THEM DO IT) to plan what they want to do? Why they intend continuing to attempt to achieve what they intended to achieve? When? Who? Where? Using what? Recruiting what over and above what they have? From whom? I believe these questions in our world of very most improved vocabulary are referred to as Vision; Mission ; Objectives; Focus; Strategies; Outputs; Process; Inputs; Activities; Plan of action; Resources; e.t.c

This is the long route but has had indescribable results. We in DEDI (NGO) have decided to take this route. For those projects in communities we have worked with thus far, applying this route has worked miracles for them and for us. This is one of the ways that are 'truly empowering'.