



Development without Dependency.

BUILD ON WHAT THEY HAVE: OWNERSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT IN HAITI

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A few years ago, a friend of mine shared with me a Chinese saying that went as follows: "Go to the people, live among them, learn from them, love them. Start with what they know, build on what they have: But of the best leaders, when their task is accomplished, their work is done, the people all remark, 'We have done it ourselves.'" It was a powerful saying with sound advice for practitioners in my field of work -- international development.

The saying was significant for me on a personal level as well. It was exciting to find a saying that so simply and accurately described the manner in which my relationship with a small rural community in Haiti first started six years ago. In fact, it not only reflected the beginning of that relationship, but it also supported the philosophy for development that my organization, Roots of Development, has so adamantly promoted since its inception.

Since Roots of Development began supporting rural communities in Haiti, a country considered by many as a wasteland of aid money and failed projects, it has seen many successes, which are humble successes when compared to the amount of people still in need of support, but significant and substantive successes nonetheless. I attribute these successes mostly to our unique philosophy for development. We are deeply committed to a set of principles with which we carry out our work. I refer to these principles as ingredients -- the ingredients to a recipe for successful community-driven development. The ingredients, and the manner in which they should be used, are as follows:

1. **Ownership.** Maximize the ownership a community has over every aspect of the work you are helping them carry out.
2. **Diverse Leadership.** Diversify leadership to include as many different stakeholders from the community as possible.
3. **A Group Decision-Making Process.** Establish a group decision-making process in which the majority rules.
4. **The Root Issue.** Identify and address the root issue of a problem, instead of secondary issues that are actually only results of an even deeper problem (the root issue).
5. **A Policy of Inclusion.** Promote a policy of inclusion to prevent individuals from feeling like they are excluded from getting involved.

6. **Transparency.** Emphasize the importance of maintaining a transparent environment throughout the collaborative process so that trust between community members doesn't deteriorate.
7. **An Understanding of Existing Systems.** Recognize and respect already-established systems.
8. **Independence.** Only support projects or activities that provide a group with greater independence. Avoid projects that will only continue to exist if there is a continuous flow of resources from you or your organization.
9. **A Strong Organization Structure.** Take the time to help the community build a strong organizational structure. In other words, institutionalize the community group and all the skills it begins to acquire.
10. **Local Resources.** Identify and value local resources, because using them ensures greater sustainability and therefore greater success.
11. **A Well-Understood Role.** Understand your role and limit it to the parameters that come with that role. Make sure you or your organization's role is a *supportive* role, not a *managerial* role.

Roots has used these guiding principles to great effect, helping thousands of residents of rural and impoverished communities in Haiti determine the direction of their future.

The Chinese saying my friend shared with me contains many of the same ingredients I outlined above. In fact, the saying stands as a recipe for development on its own. The beginning emphasizes mutual respect and the building of trust. The middle section discusses the importance of valuing local resources and local knowledge and using them as the steps to building a strong foundation for growth. The end is about ownership and about its role in fair and successful partnerships. After doing a bit of research to find the saying's origin, I came to a discouraging realization. The saying is attributed to an ancient Chinese philosopher named Laozi who first spoke it sometime in the 6th century BC. In other words, the saying, and more importantly the underlying message, has been around for over 2600 years. Somewhere along the way we lost the wisdom conveyed in this simple saying and decided to dictate and manage development to the detriment of the people we were hoping to help.

At this very moment in Haiti, there are hundreds of companies competing for contracts to build permanent homes for families who lost theirs during the January 2010 earthquake. Most of the companies have housing models that are completely foreign to the type of housing Haitians are used to building and living in. Some are made of plastic or rubber. Some come in the form of converted shipping containers almost void of windows, and some simply seem as if they were brought from another planet. Few organizations "start with what they know, build on what they have." Even before the earthquake, Roots of Development started helping its Haitian partners rebuild homes that were destroyed in the hurricanes of 2008. The design came from a local Haitian engineer, all the materials are bought in-country, the construction is carried out entirely

by local construction workers, and the families for whom the homes are being rebuilt are involved in the collection of materials, land preparation, and final construction when appropriate. Not one of Roots' Haitian-designed and Haitian-built homes had a single crack in it from the earthquake. Each two-room home costs only US\$3,500, including labor expenses.

Also, at this moment in Haiti, there are hundreds of clinics, orphanages, and schools that are being managed by foreign groups. Not only does this way of "aiding" Haiti not promote ownership or an increase in the capacity of the population, but it often creates a dependency that actually makes the population more vulnerable. Most communities I have gotten to know in Haiti have some type of system setup to handle medical issues, orphans, and education. To many, even Haitian community members themselves, these systems are seen as inefficient and inadequate. They are, however, locally "owned" systems nonetheless that came out of locally available resources (be they human or material resources). When foreigners arrive with foreign resources and foreign systems that often address the needs of a community more efficiently and in greater quantities than their own systems, communities are quick to accept the new system and let their own previous system go. Then when the foreign resources dry up, objectives change, or new leadership can't be found, these systems go away too, leaving the communities worse off than they were before.

Haiti must be managed by Haitians. As friends of Haiti, we *can* have a role, an important role in fact, but it must be a supportive role and not a managerial role. As leaders of NGOs, aid agencies, church groups and charities, we can best support communities by helping them build their own capacity by supporting readily available Haitian-led workshops focused on leadership, strategic planning, administration, accounting, etc.), and by helping them connect to technicians and greater funding opportunities. We can use the "ingredients" I listed above to evaluate our work and increase the long-term impact of our time, energy, and resources on communities around the world. As donors, we should more regularly question where and how our hard-earned money is being used when we make donations to organizations we support. Request more information about the organization's projects to determine if their approach truly promotes community ownership. Inquire as to whether or not the organization is addressing not just important issues but *root* issues, so that your donation isn't used to simply sustain a system that doesn't actually deal with the real problem. And lastly, make sure that your donation is being used to increase independence, and not dependency. We have the ability, both as practitioners of development and supporters of development, to reduce waste and increase the impact of the world's finite generosity.