May 5, 2016

Dear Gwen,

Before I write about NECOFA’s partnership with FKSW and my personal experiences in it, I would first wish to share my thoughts on development and to highlight the importance of employing universal principles of **dignity, respect, humility, collaboration, teamwork and continuous learning.**

I like to think of partnerships in development work as a “**team**” in which each player has unique expertise and experience and where every player is ready and eager to learn from the others and to share their own expertise. The success or failure of the team can’t be attributed to one player alone but to all players collectively. When they lose a match they take it with humility and use that experience to plan and prepare for the next match.

For me it is not putting anybody first but allowing **each member to lead the others** in whatever they are best at and at the same time build the skill and knowledge of the others in that activity, as we do in community mobilization.  It is **not about being an expert** but instead about sharing as much as possible with fellow players. In a partnership like NECOFA and FKSW’s, *we* might have a better understanding of the local context than our American colleagues, in which case I or any of my colleagues could be the team leader when mobilizing the community while you, Gwen, could be the team leader in another aspect of our work, possibly because of your experiences or your training, like working with students with disabilities or sharing your weaving and knitting skills with the Karunga women’s group. The team leadership keeps changing, providing more opportunities for learning and working well together.

But our focus should not be on us, it should be on the communities we work with. The team has the obligation of empowering the “beneficiary community” (I use that term for lack of a better one) to be part of the team and later to take the leadership. I am aware that nurturing this community leadership is a long and tedious process but it should be the ultimate goal and endeavour of the team.

Sustainable community development should not be measured by parameters of the donor or the NGO but rather by community defined and designed “verifiable indicators.” To realize sustainable community development the team must invest and focus more on community participation, which “refers to an active process whereby beneficiaries influence the direction and execution of development projects rather than merely receiving a share of project benefits.” The only sustainable way forward is for communities to first own their own programs and to make a commitment to strengthen their communities through collaboration.

Now let me talk about myself as an active player in the FKSW-NECOFA partnership. I don’t wish to spend too much time talking about my humble background or the transformation of our family (my parents and brothers) from abject poverty to being middle class Kenyan families through education.  But whenever I reflect on this I feel I owe the community and that I and my family **should give back to the society** by supporting the education of children from poor families so that they too can transform their families and society. But why did I choose to do this after retirement and not venture into business so that I could contribute to similar initiatives by others? I feel strongly that I should be part of that transformation not only by contributing some of my limited financial resources but also by contributing my energy, experience and skills. I find the latter contribution more important than the former.

To me our unplanned meeting in Italy was a convergence of likeminded people. The partnership has greatly benefitted the communities, NECOFA and myself. I have learned a lot from John and you Gwen during our formal and informal meetings and discussions. To a big extent you have helped and influenced my understanding and perception of “benevolence” especially appreciating and understanding the status of the “beneficiary” without being too judgmental.

Your commitment, humility and choice of project sites (Baringo, Kachiuru, Endonyio Sidai and even Waso) places that even many Kenyans don’t know of and are not willing to venture to is touching. In this partnership I feel personally and emotionally connected to the communities unlike in our more grant funded projects and interventions where we only interact with the “target beneficiaries” for the project period and strictly on just project activities. I see these other arrangements as more ‘mechanical’ as we focus more on ‘tangible results’ and hardly have time to monitor the social transformation.

In our partnership we have evolved another meaning and demystified “resources mobilization.” While it is true that FKSW has mobilized more financial and material resources for projects we (as NECOFA) have also mobilized some financial materials and human resources like governments, other stakeholders, and staff, towards the projects. The communities too have not been left out. Even in their ‘humble’ and ‘poor’ status Endonyio Sidai and Kachiuru communities have conducted “harambees” that have enabled them to address some of their needs. This arrangement is unique and confirms the fact that **nobody is too poor to contribute to the common good.** It is also a demonstration that the **community is gradually taking the lead**. Over time the communities are expecting fewer hand-outs from mzungus which in itself demystifies mzungu-African relationships. In the partnership we are able to inculcate in the youth the **culture of giving back to society,** like in the eco-mapping project and the student-tutoring-students initiatives.

The journey we embarked on together has been long without quick fixes and sometimes discouraging but after almost ten years now we are able to see the impact. It was very surprising, humbling and satisfying for me to learn that a few weeks’ ago almost all community members from Kokwa Island converged at **Raymond’s** home to celebrate his academic performance.  Our efforts have not been in vain and I am happy and proud for being part of this community transformation.

I think of the seminar for Young African Leaders and indeed our physical and phone meetings as an opportunity for cross checking with ‘campus’ to confirm whether we are still on the correct path in this jungle; whether we are still focused on the ‘goal.’ Without such forums it is possible to get distracted, to lose some values and the original inspiration could erode.

I am sure that each one of them has a moving story on how they managed to find the correct key for unlocking gates for others.  I imagine it will be an interesting seminar and I wish you and the participants success.

Tosha for now Samuel

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**Addition by Gwen**: I’ve added the following words about development from **Dr. Ron O’Connor**, an American doctor who in the 1970s foundeda global NGO, **Management Sciences for Health,** ([www.**msh**.org](http://www.msh.org)) that works with government leaders, health managers, and communities in developing nations to build stronger health systems.

“I can see that when you treat people with respect, offer them experience that can help, and then step into the background, they’re positioned to solve their own problems. When we talk about success in this work, it stems from two things…both what we contribute and more important, what people running their own programs in their own country build themselves. Behind every successful program, is somebody with the vision and passion to drive it. That’s what we wish to support.

There’s a saying… ‘Songs brought by foreigners are not long used at the dance.’ There’s a tendency of people coming from the outside to think just because they know things local people do not know, they must have the solutions. They arrive not with questions, but with answers. But development driven from the outside normally doesn’t stick, just like the songs from foreigners. The whole idea of working shoulder to shoulder with our local colleagues is what makes lasting success. Our work is based on an attitude of humility.

It is the right thing to do to help those who haven’t gotten there yet. We should be continually trying to work ourselves out of a job but not out of the mission of helping people build strong, local communities that achieve lasting impact. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are more than just American rights, they are a human right.”

**MSH** is guided in their work by this quote from Lao Tzu**,** theancient Chinese philosopher:

**Tao of Leadership**

Go to the people  
Live with them  
Love them  
Learn from them  
Start with what they have  
Build on what they know.

But of the best leaders  
When their task is   
accomplished  
The work is done  
The people will say  
We have done it ourselves.

-Lao Tzu