



Reversing Africa's poverty slide: a view from the ground

For Noel de Villiers, founder and CEO of non-governmental organisation Open Africa, three issues are key for Africa's development: the need for the emancipation of women, the need to overcome the debilitating effect of a lack of confidence among the people, and the need for people in rural and marginalised areas to get more exposure to success stories which could then inspire others. In his view, these three issues, if properly addressed, would help to reverse Africa's poverty slide.

De Villiers feels that Africa is suffering an economic crisis of such proportions that it is in need of emergency treatment.



Speaking as an African and from his experience on the ground, he says "the most striking thing for us whenever we arrange meetings for people interested in our programme is that usually the majority are women, that they ask the most questions, and are the most responsive to taking action."

Consequently the women tend to end up taking leadership roles and they also appear to have more staying power even when things begin to stall.



"The latter is significant in the sense that no grassroots development is easy. For those involved, a strong resolve is essential, as is patience, for seldom can meaningful results be achieved quickly," he told INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of Net Impact's Doing Good Doing Well 2009 conference held here recently.

From a development point of view, de Villiers says it's less important for him and his team to know why women react more positively than it is to make use of this in their work with Open Africa, an organisation which creates jobs and focuses on conservation and tourism.

"Beyond that however, one inevitably concludes that, in this situation where Africa is struggling with

such huge challenges, why is this strength not being better exploited? Whatever the reasons, smart thinking suggests that we should find and eliminate them as soon as possible,” he argues.

De Villiers finds that confidence, which to him is a basic requirement for success in anything, is so lacking, with the poor in Africa constantly reminded of their shortcomings.

“To take a leaf out of the book of no lesser a place than the USA, look what happened when Barack Obama lit a fire in the gut of that nation with his ‘Yes we can’ slogan. At Open Africa we tell them to forget about what they’ve been told about themselves and instead focus on their strengths – of which there are surprisingly many,” he says.

Focusing on strengths instead of weaknesses uncovers success stories and these can then do more to inspire progress than formal training at the grassroots level.

“This is not to say that training isn’t crucial – indeed there can seldom be too much of that. But the example of being able to see what another person has actually done is more effective in getting small- and medium-sized enterprises started,” he argues.

Yet it’s an issue because the reality is that it is so difficult to achieve.

Rural and marginalised people often can’t read or write. They have no television, they live in remote areas and there is little stimulation from outside sources.



To communicate success stories, de Villiers and his team have found that the best method is to create small groups of ten people and let them have a debate among themselves.

“That works wonderfully to inspire the people and motivate them.” However, this costs money to organise – not much money, but not the kind of money that an NGO can easily secure, de Villiers says. “Simple things tend to get ignored because they have no monetary sex appeal.”

Coupled with the severe lack of confidence is the condition called the psychology of poverty.

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When de Villiers started out at Open Africa, he and his team discovered many things they hadn’t expected. One of them was that, while there was a great level of enthusiasm initially about projects, nothing happened after that. “No follow-up, no adherence to any of the procedures agreed upon – simply a vacuum of inaction,” he recalls.

It became clear that this tended to occur in very poor areas and, at first, they could put this down to the prevalence of a dependency mode, where people were expecting them to take the action rather than do it themselves.

Dealing with that worked sometimes but not always, and after digging deeper, they came across studies on the psychology of poverty, which helped to explain why one particular project or tourism route had failed to achieve its goals.

“What the research was telling us is that some people reach a stage in the poverty cycle where they lose all hope and belief in the possibility of any kind of remedy,” de Villiers says. “In this condition they have given up and you can only do things for them, not with them.”

Interestingly that one particular project has since recovered, “after several years of perseverance on the part of some of the participants and ourselves.” The organisation needed to find individuals who wanted to make a difference, with whom it could rebuild the foundation of the initiative. De Villiers adds, however, there is still a long way to go.

Net Impact’s Doing Good, Doing Well 2009 European conference was held in Barcelona February 27-28, 2009.

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