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Development Philosophy Statement

## **Vision**

I am passionate about working to fix problems I see in the world. The issues that personally inspire me to work hardest are usually environmental issues, for I believe conserving our natural world and its resources are vitally important to worldwide wellbeing. I want to live in a world where current and future generations will be able to marvel at and appreciate all the species that currently share Earth with us. I want to live in a world where humans treat the world in which they live with respect and do not see their surroundings simply as something to exploit. My soul is fulfilled by working to see these visions realized.

An additional vision I have for a better world include one in which power differentials are not so extreme, where even poor people have access to non-corrupt justice systems, where access to education, clean water and adequate food is ubiquitous.

## **Rationale**

Though my main focus is environmental, I recognize and welcome the interplay between development issues and environmental issues. Often when environmental issues are addressed in projects without consideration of appropriate stakeholders, the projects fail. Similarly, without maintaining environmental sustainability ideals in the preparation stages of development projects, such projects often add to the aggregate environmental burden that we all ultimately share.

I recognize that environmental concerns are often considered “luxury matters” and I understand why people for whom basic needs are difficult to obtain might not rate the conservation of a species of toad as particularly relevant to their plight. However, there is an interconnectedness between humans and the other species on this planet, and though the loss of a single species might not change anything for our kind, the loss of many species or the destruction of entire ecosystems absolutely changes our productivity and wellbeing. It is like a tapestry: if you pull a single thread out, the tapestry maintains its image, but if enough threads go missing, the brilliance and clarity of that image become marred, and can even cause the tapestry to disintegrate.

Unfortunately even top United Nations officials consider addressing issues like climate

change to be “staggeringly expensive” and therefore not worth tackling (The Economist 2006). The truth is, if we want the metaphorical tapestry of our world to exist for future generations to enjoy, we must proactively address environmental issues: we can’t afford not to do so.

The ideal way to choose projects is to balance what matters (the significance) and what problem affects the most people with feasibility, or what we can do with available human, fiscal, and physical resources. I have great confidence in human intellect, advancement of technology and determination regarding what can be accomplished if the right people are given the opportunity to work diligently on issues that matter to them. I believe that what is required to achieve great conservation, energy and other environmental goals, is easily within the realm of what we can be offered, especially if these goals are paired with development strategies.

## **Values and Achievement**

One of the core values inherent in my vision is that because we are on this planet for short time, we have no more or less right to alter it than past or future generations. In the meantime, we are responsible for our actions, and we should therefore act sustainably across all sectors (environmental, industrial, economic, benefits, cultural, legal).

Another value I maintain is that of efficacy. I do not believe in wasting time or money on a project that does not result in measured benefits for the intended recipients. Thus, participatory development and progress measurement should be integral in development work. That is, in order to maximize efficiency and buy-in, I envision extensive stakeholder participation. Consensus or democracy is not necessarily called for, but programs should work *with* participants. They have the right to help shape the progression of programs that will affect their lives. It is important to make sure that stakeholders feel like the development is 1) addressing or considering their concerns, 2) respects their position or culture 3) includes and does not dismiss them. Asking questions and listening is key in this endeavor. Start with what the stakeholders and participants value. At the very least, the goal should be to keep a community engaged enough to fix problems as they arise. Community support is one of the strongest correlations with enduring efficacy.

The UNDP supports participatory development, and I wholeheartedly agree with these fundamental standards. Firstly, people’s interests should drive key decisions and

actions. Secondly, local input and skills should be incorporated when possible, and the project should invest responsibility with these people. Thirdly, women should feel welcome to participate in decision-making. Fourthly, locals should be encouraged to take action themselves. Rather than expecting development workers to aid their plight, they should eventually feel empowered to make a difference in their community by taking initiative to be heard.

Humility is also necessary to be effective. Development work is often done in a well-meaning, but arrogant fashion in which the development organizations project their own ideas about what is wrong and how to properly fix that problem. Work should be done in a positive and humble way. I believe that the durability of development work is expressed by how well the benefits linger after the development organization has exited the region. For this reason, it is imperative that development workers share their tools, thoughts and insights without imposing them on people. A good institution will stand by and listen, giving attention to those without a voice. Working in an environment devoid of hierarchies, in an effort to seek the truth may take more time, but the work will be informed by reality rather than basing decisions on assumptions. If social capital within the community is built over the program or project lifespan, the development work will support itself when the development organization leaves.

When beginning a project, the first step is to assess what the vulnerabilities and capacities of a situation are. Highly effective resources should be leveraged. Taking an assets based approach to work both inside and outside a development organization will help ensure that no existing advantages to a situation are overlooked. This is efficient and aids in building trust within and without an organization. Rather than just addressing what's lacking in a situation, an assets based approach will aid in bridging the gap between what goals are to be met and the current situation. Letting others share their strong points will help build trust and integrity within the community. Building this intentional respectful space will help people feel safe and will ultimately support any development goals to be met.

While it is not within my power to empower someone else, I can remove barriers to empowerment. Good development work does just this. In addition to listening and building social capital, an organization or individual worker should not contribute to loss, should not behave in a corrupt manner, should not discriminate, should remain honest, should provide good suggestions, should not favor the rich, and should offer fair verdicts (Narayan, et al. pg 39). By acting with integrity in these ways, we provide opportunities

for others to experience agency and this nurtures the processes that support empowerment.

In order to be efficient, and to aid with future successes, best practices should be followed when well-known, or shared with others if best practices have been formulated by your project. By avoiding the need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak, the way is paved for true innovation on the subject since time and intellect can be concentrated on new ways to improve what is already considered 'best'. Making best practice common practice is the way to create a new and better world.

While too little money can lead to a failed project, too much money can lead to mission drift. For this reason, missions and goals should be stated and referenced explicitly and regularly to ensure that projects maintain the focus those original goals. Promises of a higher budget should not trump the purpose of the project or program. Similarly, indefinite donor support is not a sound strategy. While programs can be permanent, projects should be temporary. As stated before, an exit strategy should be part of a sound development plan from Day One.

## **Measuring progress**

Of vital importance is the recognition that measuring progress regularly is key to achieving sustainability and development goals. Using preferred practice tools at regular intervals (as often as daily, certainly no less than biannually) will help to maintain focus and will help to determine any holes in the progress (Pohl 2012). This analysis not only reflects how well or how poorly the project or program is proceeding, but also provides the opportunity to adjust and adapt as necessary. Measuring progress in this way also ensures that your work is evidence-based and not simply well-intentioned and full of self-prophecy pats-on-the-back.

Finally, a change in knowledge does not mean a change in behavior. Analysis of the benefits provided to a community will examine what behaviors have changed, not just what education the community may have received or participated in. Changes in behavior add to the sustainability of benefits, and to be adequately sustainable, there should be technologies and practices in place that fit with local socioeconomic patterns. In order to be significant, a project or goal must serve enough people. These numbers should be determined at the beginning of a project, and checked alongside the preferred practice tools at regular intervals.

## **References**

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