THREE STEPS TO SUSTAINIBILITY

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Some thoughts on what makes for good aid and development projects with implications for evangelism and Bible translation.
Category: Observations

There are basically three approaches to development and/or missionary work. However, one of them is far more likely to lead to long term success, but for a variety of reasons the other two approaches are far more popular.

Intervention: in this approach, outsiders come into a community and "do things for them". This might be preaching the Gospel, digging wells or providing health care. It's all good stuff, but the essence is that it is outsiders doing their thing for locals. Projects of this sort tend to involve large budgets and expensive travel for the outside experts, but without some degree of local ownership, they are more or less doomed to failure. Once the outsiders leave or the money dries up, the project will grind to a halt. The developing world is full of monuments to this sort of approach: rusty water pumps, unused clinics and schools without pupils.

Participation: in this case, the outsiders provide the funding so that local people can do the stuff that outsiders might have done. The budgets are lower because their is less travel and local workers typically get lower salaries than outsiders (which is another issue that needs to be addressed). The chances of the project carrying on once the funding dries up are slightly higher because there is a cadre of local people who are (hopefully) committed to the project. However, this approach is still about finding a way to achieve an outsider's vision for what needs to be accomplished.

Initiative: the identification of the problem and the solutions come from the local community. There may be a need for outside funding or expertise to enable the project to go forward, but the initiative and ownership are local. This sort of project may not be as glamorous as the sort of thing that can be achieved with high levels of outside funding, but because the local community owns the project, it is much likely to continue in the long term.

There is a role for outsiders in all of these approaches; in the first case the outsider identifies the problem and solves it, in the second they identify the problem and pay others to solve it and in the last, they may have a role in helping the local community to identify what the underlying issues which cause them problems.

Evangelism and church planting are slightly different in that there is a normally a need for direct outside intervention at the outset. However, the aim must always be to see local Christian communities established which can grow and develop on their own. Churches which are dependant on missionaries for their continued existence are not healthy and over time, the vast majority of people who become Christians do so through the influence of people like themselves, not outsiders.

As I said at the outset, the last of these approaches is often less popular than the others. Let me illustrate this from Bible translation. There is something dramatic about outsiders going to an isolated people group and translating the Bible (I know, I've done it) and there is something very attractive about raising funds so that "nationals" can be involved in translation. Both of these approaches have the added benefit of being relatively rapid. However, the slow, patient work of talking to young Christian churches about the need for translation and supporting them as they

slowly develop the personnel and the capacity to translate the Scriptures for themselves is far less appealing. It might seem that nothing happens for years, which is anathema to the Western mindset. However, the latter approach is far more likely to see long-term use of the Scriptures in the community - as the English, German and other languages prove.

As always, I realise that I have simplified the issue. The three points could be substantially nuanced, but I was writing a blog post, not a text book!

Mentioning "three steps" was also a rather unsubtle reason for including this excellent video (and please, no one mention Showaddywaddy).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NckukcxHMPw