Implementing Peer-driven Change

By Mauricio Miller, 2021

Over 80% of the world's population, 6+ billion people, live in and around poverty. The gap between the poor and the well-off continues to grow. Those of my nonprofit colleagues that want to close the gap will not close the gap with any program or set of programs that we design. Feeding 120 million people as the World Food Programme does is wonderful, but we will likely need to feed or give them a little cash again next year. For over 40 years I have been a part of the helping sector that has tried to find a professionally structured solution to replicate for decades but it won't happen. Counting on us, the well-intended outsiders, will not do it. We need to go one step deeper into the community and turn the responsibility for change back to the very people we want to help. And if your initial reaction to that last sentence is that they can't do it then it is time to question that assumption.

Significantly impacting the 6 billion struggling at the bottom of all our societies is too big of a nut to crack through the thinking and leadership of outsiders even if well intended. We need to instead catalyze the *"… the incredible, omni-present, self-renewing power of social change that exists in every neighborhood, in everyday people & has existed throughout history," a*s stated by Rohit Menezes, a partner at the Bridgespan Group.

What he is alluding to is that to survive -- even for my family to survive when we were deeply in poverty -- to survive, those thought of as charity cases actually have the capacity in themselves and their peer networks to lead the change they want. That resourcefulness shows up as entrepreneurship selling tamales from a basket, surviving on minimum wage, or in group savings to avoid predatory lenders. These acts of self-help and mutuality happen every day and everywhere, but we don't recognize them. But those efforts can scale if we stop attacking people's pride and confidence through societal paternalism or bigotry. We need to give everyday people access to the very support those of us in the helping sector give to one another. Our nonprofits get funding, we expand our networks at conferences, and we are

acknowledged if we innovate. Everyday people need similar supports and they can collectively bring about their own change.

To transfer the responsibility and resources to the target communities is not straight forward. Most of those facing poverty and exposed to decades of our program's eligibility criteria, leads these families to assume they must hold back their efforts and instead follow our lead and our rules.   We need to intentionally flip the system. We need to demonstrably *give up power and make our success dependent on the efforts of the residents we came to help.* It requires our trusting the very people who are too often characterized as charity cases. The very people we want to help must lead with their ideas and actions. Those of us in nonprofits can play an initial catalyzing role, but we cannot dictate or lead the people's own self-defined paths forward. Once even a few resident groups begin to succeed others will follow.

Implementation:
The Community Independence Initiative, CII, with its partners, uses its demonstrations to test and highlight what role nonprofit professionals can play in starting a movement of self-help and mutuality. Our demonstrations begin with a local CBO partner willing to shift the power it holds. Our partners must convince participants that we are truly there to learn from their actions, rather than teach them… in most demonstrations the residents become our consultants thus we pay them a nominal sum for the time they spend 'teaching us' by filling out monthly surveys and sharing their stories. All of our nonprofit and funder partners have been amazed by what they learn in this process.

"… I didn't realize that they had so many plans and ideas about what to do!"

As a first step the partner organization identifies what we call 'seed' families that represent the diversity of social networks in the target area they serve. The international projects have all started with 10 seed families that represent the diversity of cultures, religions or languages in the area being targeted. What is important is to initially enroll a sample of the various social networks since each group will then be the ones that scale the project deeper into the region. Once we find the seed families, each seed family is asked to identify up to 10 other households *that are their friends*. Thus, we start with a minimum of 100 households in an area and if there are 6 per household, we immediately follow and see the impact on over 600 adults and children. From there it can expand exponentially, peer to peer.
The 10 self-selected friends provide participants the strength and support of what are called 'close or bonding ties' which we all need. It is their 'safe haven' of community from which they can build their lives. When a demonstration starts, the initial participants have both their friends there for support and later come to know the other seed groups of people from their region that face similar circumstances. The diversity of the different groups provides what are called 'bridging ties' which provide new ideas and inspiration.

Once these first groups are organized, we begin the monthly surveys and the transfer of power and responsibility. In what is called phase I our staff (generally a part time liaison) is not allowed to provide any advice or counseling. Our liaison only assures the surveys and stories are captured and verifiable so that we can learn what life is like for the participants and establish a baseline to compare future progress against. In the past I had to fire 4 staff that couldn't help but be helpful. It hasn't been necessary to fire anyone recently because now active participants become the primary consultants for any new project. When new participants hear it from a peer, the new families quickly realize that they must take the lead and help each other. They no longer wait for training or direction from staff.

Within 4 to 6 months of the groups meeting and filling out surveys it becomes clear to the families that their peers are really their best resource for ideas and support. They no longer ask for help from staff. And when they see someone like them succeeding FOMO, or fear of missing out, kicks in and the best ideas and actions spread. Once the participants are clearly acting on their own initiative, we enter phase II for our staff. The project liaison still does not give advice or direction but is allowed to apprise participants of the best practices by other families in their region or even in other countries.

CII facilitates the sharing of best practices. It is seeing the positive actions that others like them accomplish that accelerates the change which can reach a tipping point. CII's alternative approach is based on what is called, "diffusion of innovation". Behavioral studies show that good ideas or positive deviations occur within most groups of people and when those positive steps begin to be adopted by part of the community, the change can reach a tipping point and scale quickly. That natural diffusion or spread is how we can begin to reach a large portion of the 6 billion being left behind. That is Peer-driven Change.

Our approach is simple but giving up power, giving up being the innovators and leaders is difficult for many of us in the helping sector. Yet as I have personally made that transition, I have found that just acting as a catalyst and backstop of others is just as fulfilling as being the leader. The progress I've seen over the years of testing this approach has been amazing. In the US incomes jumped well over 20% and in Liberia income jumped 200%. Our participants create most of the jobs for the most vulnerable in their community and take care of the most vulnerable if they have access to the resources that professionals generally have. More importantly, however, is that there is a strengthening of family, friendships, and confidence about the future. With our partners, we are building an eco-system where mutuality and sharing as peers are the key values. Peer-driven change is beginning to be recognized as a new field, a global movement, led by the people themselves.

Technology is key for this peer-driven approach to spread globally. CII with the help of ImpactX, has developed an online platform, the Mutuality Platform, that can be utilized by our partner organizations as well as by the participating families themselves to submit data, track their own progress, connect with others, plan new or expanded ventures and seek donations or investments. Our partner organizations are beginning to post the most successful collective efforts in their region and these are being highlighted and featured internationally as "Everyday Changemakers".