



UBI is not a Peer-driven approach

By Mauricio Miller

(... and not to be confused with the messages from the 'Up Together' agency)

For those following the evolution of Peer-driven Change, PDC, it has become important to distinguish PDC as implemented by CII and its partners, from a myriad of top-down programs that describe themselves in similar terms as PDC. In this article let's clarify why approaches such as Universal Basic Income, UBI, and other cash-transfer programs fall short of the promise of Peer-driven Change.

Giving small amounts of cash to those facing poverty is good ... but not enough. It is still charity and like so many social sector programs, cash transfers, with few exceptions, primarily make poverty more tolerable and help in crisis. Decades of unconditional cash transfer programs have not closed the gap in wealth and social standing. And like most top-down programs, the ability to scale impact is dependent on the expansion of the organization that is implementing it. These organizations become dependent on more funding each year and the recipients in turn become dependent on that agency and its largesse.

An analogy is giving a homeless man a dollar each Sunday and expecting that he will suddenly become self-sufficient. My mother was Mexican, and I remember her lecturing a Mexican panhandler in San Jose. She told him that the only way he could change his life was to reconcile with his family and friends. She explained that change requires

strong relationships with others who will provide the safe haven, the supportive community, from which to rebuild his life. But her advice was not followed as we saw the same man out there every Sunday.

Giving cash is not a bad thing. The WFP gives out cash to over 100 million people each year and it is an important charitable act for those in extreme poverty and crisis. But what is missing is an approach that leads to the sustained improvement and independence of families so they can feed themselves, so that the parents can feed their children. The experiences with PDC to date show its potential towards creating independence by focusing on the strengthening of community and mutuality at the resident level which is the advice my mother gave to that panhandler.

In our PDC demonstration in a Ugandan refugee camp, the staff there observed the difference between this PDC approach and the many other programs he has worked with. Wilson Rwamugabo wrote:

“The participants (in other programs) become over-dependent on the program (which) makes sustainability a challenge – especially at the close of projects ... With the (PDC) approach however the families/groups have become more independent. They interact as very close friends and peers”.

Those peer relationships last and such peer support and role models, for example, led to the rapid growth of the all-Black townships after slavery. A correlating outcome when people help and inspire one another is that livelihoods improve. Peers inspire and help each other in a community where the expectation is mutuality. My first international demonstration of the PDC approach is in Liberia where incomes grew by over 250% in a year. Since the expectation within the PDC ecosystem is that people share their success, just the initially enrolled 150 households have paid their success forward by substantially impacting over 3,500 others. Some of our participants voluntarily helped a village of 200 get safe water and others expanded a clinic to serve over 1,500 each month. Unlike top-down programs that grow their staff and bureaucracy, this CII administered project in Liberia still only requires a part time staff person whose primary role is to verify the project and progress data provided by the participants.

The journey to independence is not short and what has the best chance of lasting are personal relationships. Short interventions by outsiders, like most cash transfer programs, provide band aids, not fundamental change. What is needed is to strengthen the role of everyday people that are working together and leading their own change like groups in Kenya and Tanzania that have self-organized and are willing to lead their own

change. We need to shift the responsibility for change back to the residents and give them direct access to the resources they need based on the merits of what they do to help each other.

In PDC we don't have to wait for the government to decide to try UBI or a local nonprofit to design a program. Unlike the stereotypes, those in low-income communities self-organize everywhere. Our history is replete with examples of mutuality among peers driving change, from community barn raising to the spread of all-Black towns after slavery. We are going into Ethiopia because even those under the greatest stress want to be productive and lead their own change. Those fleeing conflict in Ethiopia will follow the peer inspired programs of the refugees in our Rwamwanja refugee camp in Uganda where social networks are strengthening every day and income has almost doubled in only 6 months.

In spite of the success of self-organized collective efforts, the helping sector and its funders have not availed themselves of the “omni-present self-renewing power for social change” that is in everyday people and in every neighborhood. The primary distinction of the PDC approach from cash transfer and other approaches is its focus on strengthening the sense of community and mutuality within and across communities as well as shifting the pride, responsibility and resources back to the people to work together and lead their own change.

[CII](#) and its partners like [Root Change](#) and [Up With Africa](#) are forming an ecosystem where sharing and mutuality is a basic value and expectation. The *Center for Peer-driven Change* will provide a link through our Mutuality Platform so that sharing and inspiration can happen globally. It is already happening as the families in Liberia connect with those in the Philippines and the primary consultants to begin the projects in the Congo and Ethiopia are those in Liberia and the Ugandan refugee camp.

It is that ability to scale, peer to peer, with only minor support from outsiders that makes this approach unique, cost effective and scalable. As has happened in my previous 15 years of work in developing the Family Independence Initiative, FII, and now CII, the nonprofit can disappear, and the change will continue because of those lasting personal relationships.

Some of the confusion over the current direction of my work is that after I left FII the leadership that took over decided to rebrand as *Up Together* and move in a different direction from what I intended. They have become more focused on cash transfers and UBI. Though much of the language they use is the same, lost are the lessons from my mother's encounter with the panhandler about the centrality of a safe, supportive community where people help one another. Although the website for my past FII work

may still be linked to Up Together it does not mean that their new direction represents the evolution of my work. The lessons from FII and what is shared in my book, *The Alternative*, have evolved into the creation of *Peer-driven Change*, a new field for social change. An approach that truly puts the residents in the center of the change, as we, the professionals, step back.