



COMMENTARY

A new tool for community development

Conventionally, mining companies have wanted to take immediate measures to alleviate the poverty they observe near their mining projects in developing countries. Typically, they have done this by building schools, clinics or hospitals, and by sponsoring external health and education service providers to create new programs.

Often these efforts, although appreciated as generous gifts to local communities, don't last beyond the life of the mine, and sometimes not even beyond the tenure of the particular company staff that instigated the projects.

The reasons are because the projects: are chosen by the mining company people and/or the local elites; are built or run by outsiders, with little management involvement from local community members; are only accessible by the more affluent members of the community; require technology or knowledge not locally available to maintain them; or because the capacity of local people to manage the programs is not built up enough.

With the best of intentions, the projects are imposed upon local communities, who therefore do not feel any ownership over them, or have the capabilities to sustain them.

Further, if local communities and government agencies become accustomed to mining companies taking charge of the provision of infrastructure and services, an unhealthy dependency relationship can evolve, which works against sustainability.

I was about to start my commentary with a critique of conventional community development programs when I came across the *Community Development Toolkit* published by the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) in 2005. (The ICMM was set up

in 2001 to represent many of the world's leading mining and metal companies.)

In fact, the Toolkit contains a critique of knee-jerk infrastructure development that is spot on.

For many reasons, building infrastructure is the easiest thing for mining companies to do. Unfortunately, as recognized by the ICMM, the approach is not sustainable.

I had the opportunity to visit a mining community in the Amazon that had been the recipient, for 45 years, of what I would describe as the paternalistic attention of an international mining company. The company had built a school and the best regional hospital in the state, sealed the roads, and provided electricity for the town.

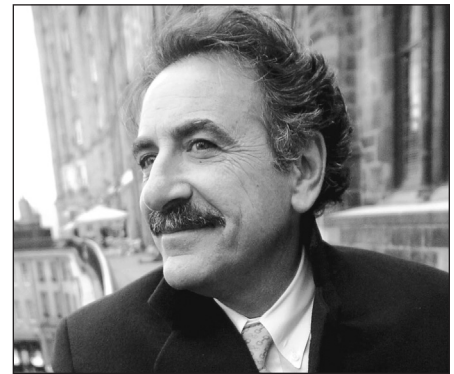
When I visited, the mine had been closed for nine years and nothing worked anymore. The power plant had shut down, the roads were reduced to obstacle courses of mud and potholes, the school had barely survived and the hospital was closed.

When we asked the local council members what had happened, they told us they had no resources to sustain the infrastructure. "We are poor," they said. "Don't give us infrastructure we cannot maintain."

I am sure that all those associated with mining could share with me many more such stories.

Let's simply say that I found the ICMM's observations on the topic of infrastructure development both accurate and welcome. I should know: I have personally witnessed what happens when the only thing that truly develops in a community is an "unhealthy dependency."

From 1972 to 1977, I worked for the *Associazione per lo Sviluppo dell' Informazione e la Formazione Professionale*



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(ASIP), an Italian agency of technical co-operation with African countries.

ASIP was one of a number of private-sector agencies created after the passage of the Pertini Act of 1971. Under the new law, young Italians were able to volunteer for two years of work in Africa in programs designed and endorsed by the Italian Foreign Office.

Initially, my agency's role was to recruit and train the volunteers bound for Africa, but very soon we became involved in conceiving and designing the programs that would employ those volunteers.

We failed miserably in Africa. Not a single project could sustain itself and often we damaged the local people by introducing practices and technologies that were antithetical to local mores and inappropriate to local needs.

We started training farms by rivers full of hippopotamuses, only to see the crops eaten when ripe. We convinced the local people to come to work by "motivating" them with increasingly damaging enticements, from sunglasses and watches to beer and whiskey.

The Foreign Office started a faculty of medicine in Mogadishu. My agency sourced the books in the U.S., had them translated into Italian and then estab-



lished Italian classes for students who, being well-educated middle-class Somalis, already spoke English.

During this period, my contact with many other foreign-aid agencies showed all donor nations had their own ideas of what the African people needed and were doing their blundering best to impose it on them.

Our programs were about us, not them and without buy-in from the locals, we were always reduced to rewarding, motivating, cajoling and bullying people to do what we wanted them to do.

Africa is poorer now than it was 40 years ago, despite the US\$1 trillion in aid that has been donated to African nations during that time. Donor countries failed and keep on failing in Africa precisely for the reasons spelled out by the ICCM.

What I experienced during my five years with ASIP was devastating, and it shaped both my personal and professional life. And the local economic and community development approach that the Sirolli Institute has developed over the past 30 years — what we call “Enterprise Facilitation” — is the direct result of it.

It was immediately after leaving ASIP that I began to research alternative development ideas in South Africa and Australia, possibly to atone for the many blunders I had been party to.

My work resulted in something new in community development. This experience was written in a book, and the book became a Ph.D.

Since then, some 300 communities have adopted Enterprise Facilitation in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the U.S., the U.K. and, more recently, the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Enterprise Facilitation was born of two ideas: 1) only go where invited; and 2) help people do beautifully what they love doing.

The first idea came from understanding the radical work of German-born economist Ernest Schumacher who,

after working in Africa and Bangladesh in the sixties, wrote *Small is Beautiful — Economics as if People Matter* in 1973.

He famously wrote: “If people do not wish to be helped, leave them alone. This should be the first principle of aid.”

The first principle of aid, therefore, is respect. If you don’t respect people, you cannot help them; it is as simple as that.

The second idea came from studying growth psychology, also called humanistic psychology.

A host of post-Freudian and post-behaviouristic psychologists advocate a person-centred, respectful approach to working with clients that is steeped in the belief that healthy people are always striving for self-improvement.

Healthy people, in other words, are self-motivated and the role of the helper is to simply remove the obstacles that are stopping them from growing into the beautiful human beings they want to become.

But “what to grow into” is unique to the individual and has to do with one’s needs and aspirations, and not those of the helper, program manager, or aid agency.

The idea is that better individuals make for better husbands, wives, parents and citizens, and that by facilitating personal growth, everybody benefits, including the community at large.

Enterprise Facilitation was born when I was invited into a remote rural community in Western Australia. Instead of showing up with ideas on what to do to develop the community, I arrived determined to *shut up and listen* to what local people wanted to do, and to simply help them realize their dreams.

The rest is history. I helped a few people start small businesses in my first year there. The community then took hold of the project (23 years and counting) and continued to help local people transform their own ideas into livelihoods.

In the process, various Enterprise Facilitators have helped to start 800 new

businesses and the community has grown to 14,000 people from 10,000 — not an easy task in rural, remote Western Australia.

Now we teach communities how to establish their own Enterprise Facilitation projects and work with corporations, governments and interested parties to develop responsive social infrastructure capable of facilitating not only enterprise, but education, health and social services.

We have discovered that passionate people wish to better themselves. This is the key that unlocks our clients’ long-lasting commitment to work at their ideas. It is their commitment that allows them to gratefully accept help. It also generates enormous gratitude and a virtuous cycle where “helped people” become helpers of others.

After reading the above it will not surprise you that we are in full agreement with the suggestions of the ICCM.

The ICCM’s Toolkit, after discussing the obvious benefit of offering training and apprenticeships in trade areas to build the skill level of the local population, goes on to say the following: “The challenge, however, is to not only build the skills but also facilitate the growth of other activities in parallel to mining. . . Mining companies can localize some of their product and service procurement policies to help build local supply capabilities. . . In addition to helping train local community members to provide goods and services, companies can also consider supporting micro-credit schemes to help encourage small business.”

Absolutely!

The Toolkit mentions the Lac La Ronge Indian band, in Saskatchewan, which did precisely that, first developing trucking and catering skills with support from local uranium mines. Over time, the band expanded its business away from the mines, and in 2005, brought in \$65 million supplying services to the surrounding region.



While the Toolkit's advice for companies on what to do and what not to do is excellent, it falters when it proposes tools to achieve what it has so eloquently suggested.

The problem? The 17 tools it proposes are all top-down.

They are perfectly suited to infrastructure development, and some of them may be useful in identifying areas of trade and apprenticeship to offer to residents but, in our experience, they are useless in fostering entrepreneurship.

We've seen that to "facilitate the growth of other activities in parallel to mining" necessitates facilitation tools, and these tools have to be, by definition, bottom-up and responsive.

Working with entrepreneurs requires the creation of a convivial social infrastructure that allows for free, confidential, caring, competent and compassionate service to them. Unless such social infrastructure is in place, would-be entrepreneurs will shy away from working with us or, even worse, they will come to seek our help for the wrong reasons.

The change that is required to go from "planning for infrastructure development" to "facilitating local entrepreneurship" is huge. Not only are the tools different, everything is different, including the attitude and expectations of the people involved.

If invited to work in a mining community, the Sirolli Institute engages first with the mining company management and trains a small team in our principles and practices.

We then assist that team to recruit an Enterprise Facilitator, preferably a native of the country, both culturally and linguistically suited to operate in the community.

This facilitator, whose selection is based on certain personality traits and life experiences, is then trained by us to respond to local would-be entrepreneurs and help them transform their ideas into sustainable enterprises.

In our counterintuitive methodology, the facilitators are taught not to approach local entrepreneurs to offer help, nor to motivate local people to start businesses. We instead build a community team to introduce the facilitator informally to friends and family members.

We also train these "community helpers" (resource team) to assist the facilitator with local intelligence and know-how.

Taken together, the management team, the Enterprise Facilitator and the local resource team constitute the convivial social infrastructure I mentioned earlier.

In our view, building the community's capacity to help itself is the precondition for sustainable development. A community that learns this can benefit from better infrastructure because, in the long term, it will have the resources to maintain it.

When working with mining companies, we have noticed that the language and thinking behind community development have changed dramatically. The rhetoric is in place. It is the tools that have to catch up.

Reviewing the bibliography of the ICMM Toolkit, I couldn't fail to notice that some tools had been borrowed from international development agencies and institutions that I call, affectionately, the "agents of doom."

I've seen "assessment, planning, managing and monitoring" — their tools of preference — used in Africa time and time again, and they didn't work.

Have things changed there? The rhetoric in international development circles is becoming more refined and the celebrities involved even more impressive, but what is being done today is more of the same: more money to build hospitals, schools, water treatment and roads for communities that cannot maintain them.

Shouldn't you be skeptical then about borrowing tools from people that keep on failing?

There is a concept in the psychology of science that says that the tools you use determine your relationship with the object or the subject you are interacting with. As the old saying goes, if you only have a hammer, you will tend to treat everybody as if they were nails.

What we imply here is that to achieve what the ICMM suggests, new tools have to be used.

Fortunately these new tools already exist, and they are in the toolkit of unconventional professionals such as Enterprise Facilitators, who are finally being discovered by the mining community.

And these new tools are immensely cheaper to operate and implement than the old ones. The salary of our first Enterprise Facilitator in Africa is US\$200 per month, an amount the local community will be able to sustain if it's happy with the results of the project.

— *Born in Italy and now living in Sacramento, Calif., the author has worked worldwide for more than three decades in the field of local economic development. He is founder of the Sirolli Institute (www.sirolli.com) and author of Ripples from the Zambezi, a history of the institute's proprietary approach to development, named Enterprise Facilitation.*