

## Community-based Development: Helping People, Building Dreams

When we began talking about community-based development as a way of bringing people closer to the accepted standards of existence within their own world, we did not know the magnitude of the ideas we were playing with. In truth, all we wanted to do was set up support processes to help the people in the villages we went to. We thought of the customary borehole projects, with the regular women's programs, such like we'd heard before at conferences in Abuja and Lagos, and on the Internet. But then the ideas began to mature and to expand until it began to look like we could do more than window dress for the communities so we could show up in the papers smiling and looking like saints, but knowing deep in our hearts that what we did was not enough and could not be sustained.

Then again the ideas began to develop even more until it became a vision: what if we engendered a process that did stand the test of time, or created a system that worked to reproduce itself, like a dynamo: mechanical energy turned to electrical energy and back to mechanical and again to electrical. Because of the nature of our vision, we became convinced it was possible to create an economic organism whose functions were able to renew itself while being able to relate favorably with the outside world. To us at the Wellbeing Foundation (WBF), that was the meaning of true development. For the first time, we began to see that it was possible to help the people we came across in a way that would ensure that if we came back many years down the line, the process we started would not only have continued over time, but would have replicated itself and formed a network of self-reliant men and women running their local economy by themselves.

We began to look at the ways in which we could reach out to people who shared the same thought like we did. In our own minds, we imagined that surely someone with a good enough idea would have been out there achieving results with the principles we were talking about. When we did find out, it was as though we were only grazing the surface. We came across people who believed the same thing and had even given theirs a name. Not only that, they had been working with these principles for more than fifty years! In the months following, we became increasingly convinced that these were people we wanted to work with. They were willing to work with us too and to share some of the experience they had gathered in the last half century. Only problem was, we were in Nigeria and they were in the US; we were relatively unknown and came from a part of the world where much of the information that went out was less than favorable; they for the most part, kept their fingers crossed.

It's one thing to relate with people over the Internet and share relevant data that have a bearing on one's purpose. Both parties don't have to have ever met and have no obligations beyond their present electronic correspondence. It is an entirely different matter however if both parties are now able to establish a bond that brings them closer to a point where they meet face to face, shake hands and even sign a memorandum of understanding to work jointly on development models that would shape the way thousands of people would live their lives! That's the part that seemed like a dream.

On Sunday, February 27, 2005, Professor Maurice Albertson, President and Founder of the Village Earth Consortium, arrived Nigeria on a KLM Flight. As he came through the arrivals section, he smiled when he saw his name on the cardboard, which a WBF staff was holding up. Actually he would have been hard to miss: six feet four inches tall with thinned-out white hair, he walked with a certain limp and had a little gadget clipped to his chest that looked like a pacemaker (turned out to be a transmitter for his hearing aid). "Call me Maury," he'd always say, Professor Albertson, 83, was the last of 10 guests, whom we'd successfully convinced that coming to Nigeria, would be worth the time and the effort, not to mention the money. In their own words, they had come to see for themselves.

For over 50 years Maury has been Professor at Colorado State University. He served as Director of the Research Foundation, Director of International Programs and Professor of Civil Engineering. His professional fields are environmental engineering, the hydrogen economy, water resources engineering, irrigation engineering, hydropower engineering, low-cost and low-energy sustainable wastewater treatment, constructed wetlands for wastewater treatment, and international development, specializing in sustainable village-based development. He is also co-founder of the American Peace Corps and has worked with many US presidents.

So what was he doing in Nigeria? "I heard that the country's running a democracy now. I believe that we're at the threshold of something great here. Back in 1969, we (talking about Colorado State University) organized a team to come here for some research and the conclusion was that this country's got great potential in oil and agriculture, but it seems in the last 30 years or so, they spent it on oil alone...result now is over half the population is poor. Remarkably, that was also predicted back then. I believe however that now's the time to act in the key areas that would put the nation on the path to true progress and prosperity."

Dr. Edwin Shinn Executive Director, Village Earth, who had also come on the trip, has, like his friend, Dr. Albertson, put in over 30 years, traveling across the villages of India, Kenya, Peru, Guatemala, Wounded Knee, Rural California, Pakistan, Indonesia, and Egypt, working on developmental projects; building communities and helping them to preserve their identity. They'd gotten interested in Nigeria mainly because our areas of intervention at WBF were similar to what they had been doing for many years and they knew we needed help.



At WBF, our approach to dealing with issues affecting the rural poor is a holistic one. We know what we have to do; we have been among the people and know what their dreams and aspirations are. We also saw on the faces of the children we met when we went out, a certain type of hope that seemed to say that somewhere beyond the leaking classroom ceiling and the cold cement floor; outside the threadbare blue or green check of their uniform, there is a world where they can be all they can possibly be.

Participation is the key to human motivation. When the communities are directly involved in developmental efforts, there is no telling how far they can go. We have come to believe that in every community there is the seed of self sustainability and self sufficiency. People in the communities have the basic intelligence for sustainable socio-economic development with expert help from an External Activator. The Wellbeing Foundation is the catalyst, using the “bottom-up” approach to ensuring sustainable development. In order to be truly sustainable, such developmental strategy must be multi-sectored by its very essence and this is what informs the WBF program which covers the broad areas of health, education, social welfare, safety and security, disaster response and relief, arts and culture, community development, environment and ecology.

The Village Earth model for sustainable development is based on a set of principles, which are time tested and if applied would produce the same results over and over again. The central objective of the development plan is to create communities that are self-sustaining and prosperous. Like the WBF programs, the people are at the centre of all ongoing projects. The approach to poverty eradication must be multi-pronged; geared at creating opportunities in the key areas of living, which hitherto, were inexistent. The people should be able to relate to the initiatives that come to them because they are not only the beneficiaries but also the people who would ultimately be responsible for the sustenance of the project.

Take for instance, our education initiative. After we laid the foundation for the Al Muwahideen Nursery and Primary School in Ori Oke, Ilorin, we knew that the only way for the people in the community to let their children attend the school was if they trusted that what the school had to offer would be beneficial to them in the short and long run. The vision had been to address illiteracy in faith-based educational institutions by giving the children access to learning in the basic subjects of Arithmetic, English Language and Science. But we were not going to leave it at that, or go ahead and bring in contractors with state-of-the-art equipment to build a world class school that the people could not relate to. Instead we created opportunities for employment among the locals in the building and equipping of the school and also in capacity building of teachers who were from the area. In the end it was hard to tell who actually built the school. All we can say is we provided the plan and the resources. The people built it themselves! Now they own it and can run it without us being around to superintend or to provide human and material resources that might well be utilized elsewhere.

The purpose of the VE model is primarily to connect the two-thirds of the world’s population that live in poverty to the technical, financial, social and informational resources, which can be made available through an organized mechanism that establishes the people and empowers them for life. This takes anywhere between five and 15 years on the average, as villages and poverty levels vary from place to place. This model is implemented by Participatory Practices for Sustainable Development (PPSD). According to them, it can be applied to the problem of eliminating poverty worldwide, and for addressing many other associated problems. The model helps the people in creating a vision for the future, identifying problems preventing the achievement of this vision and then finding and implementing solutions to the problems. They do it themselves with the help of a nearby Service Centre, which is also part of the same model. The Centre provides access to information, financial and other resources.

The basic organizational unit for development in the VE model, which WBF model has now fine tuned for the Nigerian context is the Resource Access Unit, (RAU), made up of a critical mass of about 50,000 people. Each RAU has a service centre to provide access to resources that are required for sustainable development. See details at [www.villageearth.org](http://www.villageearth.org)

On March 1, 2005, WBF President Mrs. Toyin Saraki, the staff, members of Village Earth and Cosmopolitan Allied Health Institute prepared to travel 248 kilometers North West from Ilorin to Kosubosu in Baruten LGA of Kwara State. A set of challenges presented themselves, which some of us were already aware of. We had warned that the older ones among our guests could stay in the city for that day because the road was bad and what would normally have been a quick two hours might eventually turn out to be five or six hours, depending on how fast one drove or how good the vehicle was. Apart from that, we had concerns about the heat and the dust on the dirt road. But our guests were prepared for this type of thing and they wouldn’t be deterred from going on the trip

They had a principle: go to the people; live among them; learn from them; plan with them and work with them. No doubt, this couldn’t be done by sitting in the city and making assumptions about what the people needed or creating solutions for the communities, based on hearsay. So we got on the road at 7am hoping that at we would be in Kosubosu by midday at the latest. When we eventually did get there it was almost three hours behind schedule, but everyone agreed that the trip was worth it. Almost in the back areas of civilization, Baruten has largely suffered neglect for a number of complex reasons which successive governments in Kwara State had given as basis for not bringing the people closer to resources or improving the way they lived.

All along the road for many kilometers between Ilesha and Okuta, all the way to Kosubosu, the LGA secretariat, school children and teachers lined the dirt roads and waved at the motorcade which left Ilorin as six or seven but had now grown to about twenty



five cars. The people believed it was not everyday that the Governor's Wife would embark on that kind of journey and in this case no Governor's Wife had ever even visited. And so it seemed that everyone who had a car, from the local government chairman to the House member from the area and some others, joined our convoy. What was meant to be a quiet fact finding mission turned out to be a huge ceremony with much pageantry. The people proudly displayed their culture and even in their poverty still found much to be grateful for and a reason to celebrate.

The WBF, VE and CAHI delegation was on ground immediately, asking the people questions and making notes. All agreed that work should begin immediately and that all sectors should be tackled. There is an immediate need to start building a critical mass of people to form an RAU and to begin providing access to resources as soon as the group receives funding. That night, WBF President, Mrs. Saraki laid the foundation of the first Resource Access Unit in Okuta – Baruten local government area. The effect on the people, especially the women and children was almost overwhelming. There was renewed hope for their own future as they danced under halogen lights powered by an aging Suzuki generator.

At this point, the people of Baruten and indeed the other local governments WBF touched may not fully understand the meaning of our visit. For many, it just meant their First Lady came to visit them and that called for celebration, nothing more. For us at the Wellbeing Foundation and our partners, Village Earth: the Consortium for Sustainable Village-based Development and Cosmopolitan Allied Health Institute, it was the beginning of a process that would create a different society within a few years; a course that would bring sustainable development to the people by giving them access to needed resources in every facet of their lives. What then? We will start with what they know and build with what they have.

A few days later, at the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between WBF, Village Earth and Cosmopolitan Allied Health Institute, WBF President, Mrs. Saraki said: "...the signing of the MOU with the two organizations is the start of great things to come in the near and distant future." -

By **Yomi Owopo**

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