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Debby Thomas

George Fox University, [dthomas@georgefox.edu](mailto:dthomas@georgefox.edu)

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# HOLISTIC COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT IN RWANDA

Debby Thomas

When I left the United States to live in Rwanda, Africa, I had a nine-month-old baby, and I was pregnant. I knew I wanted to help the Rwandan people but wasn't sure how. The first challenging years included learning French in Belgium (where my son was born) then learning Kinyarwanda (the language of Rwanda) from French. Living in Rwanda while learning language with children was incredibly taxing, difficult, and dangerous.

As I started to work with my organization – The Friends Church of Rwanda – I was deeply disturbed to discover that spirituality and the physical life were not linked. Many of the people in our churches attended church on Sunday full of excitement and hope but would return to a poverty-stricken home with broken marriages, scarce food, and where babies died of diarrhea. Spirituality was not consistently linked with the physical realities of poverty that Rwandans faced on a daily basis. I could not tolerate being a leader in an organization that encouraged spirituality that had little or no effect on the physical lives of Rwandans. My sincere conviction is that true spirituality transforms every aspect of life; I see our spiritual and physical lives as inexorably intertwined.

It was from this underlying sense of frustration and discomfort that I began to arise as a leader. Although I had an official position of leadership at the national level of the organization, my true leadership presence only emerged when I set my mind on bringing about change. I wanted to address

the physical problems that Rwandans faced and advocate spirituality that effects whole life transformation. This conviction led me on a three-year journey of trying various approaches, many of which outright failed or had a limited impact. I learned through personal experience some leading causes of development failure.

I had several failures or semi-failures around fuel efficient cooking, farming, animal husbandry, small businesses, and other projects. I was perplexed about why my solutions did not take root. I learned that I needed to spend more time and energy in relationship with people, helping them to change their thinking and beliefs around dependency and fatalism. I needed to help them walk through the process of identifying problems, finding solutions, and implementing these solutions on their own. I was still taking too much initiative and trying to find the answers for them. When they identified their own problems, and found and implemented their own solutions, it stuck. Not only did it stick, but their solutions were richer, deeper, and more applicable than mine. Helping them become problem solvers meant that they became capable of solving every problem they ever encounter. That is infinitely more powerful than me using my resources to solve a few problems for them.

This powerful way of engaging in development is called *Discipling for Development* where the discipleship (spiritual) and the development (physical) aspects of working in communities are intertwined. I was trained by the Navigators in these innovative and empowering ways of doing holistic community development which gave me the tools to facilitate the holistic community development that I dreamed of. I found that once Rwandans understood, accepted, and implemented this way of doing development, they became capable of driving their own development indefinitely and they have the ability to help others engage in this process as well.

I have an entrepreneurial spirit. When I see a problem, I become obsessed with finding solutions, doing research, implementing, failing, learning, designing, teaching, and training until I come up with a solution. This process is how I found my calling as a leader – not out of a desire to lead, but out of a desire to find answers, to solve hard problems, and to have a lasting impact. Holding an official role as leader was less powerful for me than leading organizational change. Once I had a vision, and faced opposition, my inner leader arose. Even then I didn't lead change through my official position, but rather I led by example and through relationship.

## THE THREE ELEMENTS TO DETERMINE LEADERSHIP STYLE

In determining the style, strategy, and tactics to create, grow, and lead sustainable development, there are three main factors that I considered, and each of these comes with a question. (1) The cultural context in general and cultural norms for leadership. Do I know the culture deeply, can I operate in that culture, and have I identified the cultural expectations of leadership? (2) The desired outcome of sustainable development. What kind of leadership will produce sustainable development among these particular people? How can my leadership help them own the development process and make it sustainable over time?, and (3) My own personality and leadership preferences. What kind of leadership works for me? What kind of a leader am I willing and able to become to help these people in this context to attain sustainable development? Throughout this chapter, you will see how I navigated these three factors, how I answered these questions, and what kind of leadership I found to be most effective in producing sustainable development in the Rwandan context.

### Leadership and Culture

In my 18 years in Rwanda, I found that the preferred leadership style leaned toward the authoritative and paternalistic models of leadership. Rwandans wanted a strong leader who would provide for them, and they would in turn honor and respect that leader. It is easy for development workers to fall into a paternalistic relationship. For example, Americans tend to have a “can do” attitude. We believe we can make a difference, solve the problem, and initiate change. Many Rwandans, on the other hand, tend to have a fatalistic and dependent attitude in which they believe they cannot affect their circumstances, and they are entirely dependent on others to provide for their needs. These two beliefs come together in a paternalistic leadership style; each party gets to keep their dominant belief system, and each gets what they need from the other. However, I had seen the crippling effects of dependency resulting from paternalistic styles of leadership and I wanted to find a different way to lead. I was looking for a form of leadership that would empower people to affect their own transformation rather than trap them in a dependent relationship.

Although the communities where I worked expected and preferred paternalistic leadership, I resisted implementing this form of leadership. The

paternalistic style of leadership repelled me; it didn't fit with my egalitarian values, or the results that I desired. I found it difficult and complicated to break out of this culturally acceptable form of leadership. When starting to work in a community, I spent three to five months building relationships, doing skits and discussions exploring and describing an alternative relationship to dependency and paternalism. My goal was to walk alongside Rwandans, helping to build their confidence, helping them recognize the resources they have, identify their own problems, and learn the problem-solving process to pull themselves out of poverty.

It was hard going. I spent long days in communities experiencing the extreme poverty of the community members. I didn't help them or do anything for them. I built relationships and tried to convince them there is another way to work together. I worked toward a relationship that would allow empowerment to happen. Although it took a long time, and much effort, they came around. They started taking responsibility. They started identifying their resources and greatest points of poverty. We worked together to find solutions to the problems that they perceived to be the most pressing. And when they succeeded in some small way, they gained confidence and tackled another issue. The most important aspect of this kind of leadership is that Rwandans themselves provided not only the solutions, but also identified what they perceived as their biggest problems. There was ownership from the beginning. It took us a long time to gain momentum, but once we did, it was sustainable.

I consistently struggled to find balance between leading in a way that is an authentic expression of who I am, leading in a way that provided what the people needed, while being culturally appropriate. Empowering leadership fits well with who I am, I felt comfortable and authentic leading in this way. I resisted paternalistic leadership which was the expected and acceptable form of leadership because I found that empowering leadership was the most effective for producing lasting change and sustainable development.

## RWANDA'S HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The development work I did was deeply affected by the culture and context of Rwanda. The recent genocide, the political realities, and working with government officials in the process of doing development affected my work.

I speak Kinyarwanda fluently so I understand many of the nuances of culture and the larger political and environmental context as I heard it explained by the people I worked with. The work of empowering community members to find creative solutions to their problems necessitated taking into consideration the many complexities of culture and context in Rwanda.

Rwanda's history of genocide in 1994 stands out as a distinguishing factor affecting how I led in Rwanda. When I arrived in Rwanda in 1997, the country and the people were still devastated from war. I found that listening was an important part of leading in this context, for example, listening to people's stories, their experiences, their hurts, and their dreams, also, listening to their struggles and how they perceive their own poverty and difficulties. This required knowing the language, which was a significant investment of time and energy on my part. I also had to develop the ability to distance myself from the hurt and devastation as well as their formidable expectations of me and what I could provide for them. It threatened to drown me at times. Many people told me their stories of hardship and misery, and wanted me to help. At times, it was more than I could manage.

The default for a development worker arriving in a country like Rwanda is to plan and implement activities immediately. This relief activity is necessary after a disaster, but is not ideal to produce long-term stability and economic growth within the population. True help, true change, doesn't happen this way. It took me many years to learn that my role was to help Rwandans assume responsibility and ownership over their own life circumstances. The economic realities were dire, and my desire to offer immediate help was understandable. However, I set my sights on a form of development that would be sustainable in the long run rather than expedient in the moment.

## GAINING LEGITIMACY AS A LEADER

I found it hard to develop my legitimacy as a leader since people wanted me to be a paternalistic leader. Their first reaction was to brush me off, thinking that I was not a real leader, that I didn't know how to lead, or that I didn't have anything of value to offer. It was the consistency of relationship, my commitment to understand and honor their language and culture, and the consistent message through my leadership style and actions that I wanted to empower them, not provide for them that eventually won them over.

I had some fierce opponents; my entrepreneurial spirit and penchant for trying new things were not always appreciated. There were a few leaders in my organization who were loud and publicly declared my inability to lead, discounting the kind of development I wanted to enact. They thought I was crazy to experiment with a different approach to development and declared that it would never work.

Instead of reacting or quitting, I kept my head down and kept up my work in the communities. I trained like-minded Rwandans who more readily accepted my leadership style and were open to my new ideas on development. I also garnered the grace of one or two top leaders to move ahead with my projects; they acted as protectors for me to move forward even under opposition. After three or four years, the first community that I worked in had some profound and dramatic changes moving them out of poverty.

As I worked with the community, they identified farming and animal husbandry as two areas of difficulty for them. We learned about different ways to farm, ways to combat some of the problems they identified. Some of the farmers in the community tried out a few of the techniques. One of the leaders in this community, Ugiriwabo, was a farmer and he tried out some of the techniques we discussed. When we started, he had one small field and would get 2–3 bags of beans and corn from his field each season. After a couple of years, he was getting around 20 bags of beans and corn from his field. Soon he had enough money to buy another field. Later, he was growing seed corn for the government that was sold to other farmers. Another man in this community, Bosco, described himself as the poorest of the poor. He says he used to beg from the beggars. After a couple of years in our community development group he was growing better crops, raising pigs, chickens, rabbits, and even had a cow (a cow is a sign of wealth in Rwanda). In fact, he stood out as having an outstanding household and was hired by an international non-governmental organization to train people in other communities. He went from being the poorest of the poor to having a salaried job, which was unheard of in this rural community.

Community members also grew spiritually and that impacted the development efforts. Together we studied stories from the Bible highlighting God's love for people and gift of grace for empowering people. This helped form a foundation of self-acceptance, value for every person in the community, and a sense of purpose and stewardship of their resources. Understanding that

God cares for every aspect of their lives built a foundation of hope and empowerment from which to take initiative and improve their lives.

The stories of whole life transformation are too many to describe here. Family after family has improved their livelihood by leaps and bounds. Many significantly increased their crops, raised animals successfully, became healthier as they ate more vegetables and drank clean water, and started small businesses for increased income. They spent six months discussing how to improve their marriages so as to further improve their livelihood. They also spent time learning how to budget – how to use the income they now had for the first time in their lives. Women became fully engaged in the community, respected, and listened to. The best part is that since we didn't do this for them, we didn't give them anything, once they learned how to change their lives they kept on growing and changing long after we left. They are still hard at work today; most recently, they built a primary school for their village.

When the success of the community development efforts became public, the leaders who had opposed me started asking questions. It wasn't long until they were convinced that this community was seeing profound changes and they wanted help doing the same work in their own communities. Soon, there were so many requests to work in various regions of Rwanda that we did not have the staff to cover the needs.

I had to earn legitimacy. With some, it was through consistently building relationships based on empowerment. With others, I needed to prove that my way of approaching development as well as my way of doing leadership was legitimate and that it worked. I went through some hard years with significant criticism and pushback. But now, those are the people who are continuing this work because they experienced the results. Establishing legitimacy doesn't happen in a day or a month or a year. For me, it happened over a longer period, especially since my leadership style is different than the cultural expectations.

During this time, I held an official position of leadership. Yet, I didn't choose to use that positional leadership to enforce my ideas. Rather, I focused on proving that what I was doing had merit. My goal was not to tell people what they ought to do, but rather to effect change in the organization. I wanted to affect profound change, not enforce my ideas through positional leadership.



## INDIVIDUALISM/COLLECTIVISM

I lived and worked in a culture that was dissimilar to mine in many ways. Collectivism and high power distance are aspects of the Rwandan culture that I found to be different from my own culture. I discovered that although I did not choose to embody their preferred leadership style, it was important to be intentionally knowledgeable and respectful of their culture.

My personality and ways of being are influenced in many ways by the individualistic values in the American culture. I love getting things done, accomplishments are important to me, and tasks matter. In my mind, being different is desirable and thinking outside the box is a strength. My default is to challenge the status quo, try new things, voice my opinion, and find ways to solve problems. I see change as good and seek to create a better solution. The low power distance ideals in my culture also shape me. I desire to respect everyone equally and give others voice when possible. I am not drawn to a leadership style that enforces power, but rather one that shares power. These personal characteristics, rooted in my cultural values, created tension in the collectivist and high power distance environment. My Rwandan friends cared deeply about community, about being like others, fitting in, and honoring the “status quo.” At times my actions were perceived as strange, threatening, and inappropriate. It was a constant struggle for me to decide when to embrace their cultural norms, and when to challenge them.

In many instances, I worked hard to do things their way. When working with Rwandans I often took their cues as to how to get something done, how long to discuss an issue, when to get permission from superiors, and so on. Protocol is important in Rwanda and doing things the prescribed way is important to being successful. Breaching protocol is a serious misdemeanor, and yet understanding the expectations of protocol was often baffling to me even though I spoke the language. I developed an ability to watch and learn, follow the flow of others, and ask questions so that I could “get it right.” My effort in this area helped my Rwandan colleagues become more comfortable with me. It helped me build trust with them. However, there were times when I missed the cultural cues, and there were other times when I chose to go against protocol. I chose when to go against the cultural norm, most of the time choosing to do things their way as much as possible. Big issues such as how to lead, breaking the cycle of dependency in development,

melding the spiritual, and physical aspects of development were areas where I intentionally chose to differ from cultural norms and expectations.

When I did not meet role expectations or personality expectations, I found that my colleagues, friends, and neighbors would deal with this in a collectivistic way. When I was perceived as having “deviant” behavior, they would act under the collectivistic assumption that I desired to fit in and to meet the community’s expectations of me. Thus, their main form of correction was to start talking about my actions among themselves, as a way of informing me that I was acting as a deviant and as incentive for me to change my ways. This was the respectful and appropriate way to deal with social deviancy.

This form of cultural discipline would backfire on them since I did not respond well to this behavior. First, the rumors often didn’t reach me since I didn’t involve myself in those activities. Also, rather than hearing the rumors and changing my ways I would either feel confused and hurt or I would resolutely continue in my ways (if I had purposely chosen to do something outside of cultural norms). This form of social discipline was effective for Rwandans and appropriate in their culture but highly ineffective on their American colleagues.

During the times when these tactics were most rigorously used, I would long for an environment where I could be authentically me and use my strengths and gifts freely. I longed for an environment where I was appreciated, respected (according to my cultural norms), and understood. The expectations were overwhelming and strong, and the dissatisfaction with me being different was difficult. I felt it was a constant struggle to use my gifts and strengths; there was constant push back. In the long run, all of this made me stronger, but at the time it made already difficult and taxing work all the more challenging.

Because of my individualistic bent, my proclivity was to work with one or two families in a community and then let them be an example for other community members. However, in a collectivist society, this is counterproductive. When one or two families start to rise above the others, the community is shamed by their success, and they may sabotage those families. Thus, I adopted the methodology of working with whole communities instead, honoring their value to remain on the same level as their peers. In this way, the whole community would experience significant improvements in their lives. If a family or two didn’t experience improvements, they were seen as

deviant to the community standard and were pressured to meet the new status quo. In this way, the cultural norms worked toward sustainable development rather than against it.

The difficult question is: What do you strive to change and challenge about the culture and what do you strive to honor, respect, and incorporate into the development effort? For me, this was a question I faced moment by moment every day.

### Gender Issues

I am a woman who founded and led a grassroots-level holistic community development movement that is active and growing today. As a formal leader, I often did not fit the social norms and expectations of me. Most of the leaders in my organization were men, but there were a few of us women leaders. In the language of Kinyarwanda, there is a word that is used to praise a woman, or to praise a man for the kind of wife he has – *witonze*. *Witonze* means a woman who is calm, reserved, obedient, and mild mannered. This word is used to praise children as well. I did not fit into this category of a praiseworthy woman.

The preferred role of women was also well established. Since this was a church organization, a woman who preached with great enthusiasm or prayed often and prayed in public was acceptable and even praised. Furthermore, White women were expected to take on traditional roles like leading children's ministry, teaching Sunday school, or leading women's Bible studies. None of these activities fit my personality, strengths, or desires. There was a sense of tension between my community and me due to the mismatch between their expectations of me and my unwillingness and inability to meet those expectations.

One distinct advantage that I had as a woman is my proclivity toward empowerment and collaboration. It was easier in some ways to convince people that I was not the "White person who has come to save them" since I was a woman. I came across to them as having less authority. They were more comfortable learning to discuss issues with me rather than having me be in charge. Empowerment and collaboration seemed natural to me. I was drawn to collaborate, and to empower others to take on their own development, both spiritual and physical.

In one community, when I started working with them the women came to the meetings, but they sat silently. They would not look at me, talk to me, or participate in any way. Only the men spoke. It took years of work, but today, in those communities, the women are animated and fully involved, they teach, they discuss, and they are full members of the community.

#### WHAT I AM MOST PROUD OF

*Go to the people,  
Live among them,  
Learn from them,  
Love them.  
Start with what they know,  
Build on what they have:  
But of the best leaders, When their task is done,  
The people will remark, "We have done it ourselves."  
[Chinese Proverb]*

I am most proud that the people in the communities where I worked are accomplishing bigger and better transformation now than they did when I was with them. I am proud that I helped them change their way of thinking, to learn to be less dependent, to think for themselves, and to take on full responsibility for their own transformation and growth. I helped them to become problem solvers. I helped them to appreciate what they have and to change what wasn't going well. I gave them something that they will use for the rest of their lives. This gift is much bigger than any amount of money I could have given them. Now they have what they need to continue their own journey of development, to teach their children to do the same, and they are reaching out to neighbors and other communities to help them as well. And in all of this, they look around and say, "We have done this ourselves!" that is what I am most proud of as a leader.

I had been working in one impoverished rural community for several years. One day on my long, hot, and bumpy journey into the village I noticed some new houses by the side of the road. My heart sunk. Was there a non-governmental organization here building houses for them? I had worked so hard for them to take ownership of their own development and I feared a recurrence of the dependent mindset through an organization

providing houses for them. During our community meeting, I sheepishly asked them about the new houses. They looked at me and said, “Those are our houses.” “Oh,” I responded, “How so?” They proceeded to explain to me that none of them had ever owned houses, and the hovels they rented were not satisfactory, and they were fed up with that fate. So, 16 families got together to build themselves houses. They were all too poor to build their own house, but all 16 families had enough pooled resources to complete one house. Once they completed the first house, they built another one. They had built eight houses so far. Furthermore, they shared, three of the families consisted of widows and children whom they included in the group even though they lacked the resources to contribute on the level of other families. I was dumbfounded. My initial thoughts were: Why hadn’t they thought to tell me this? They had been working for months, and it never came up in our weekly meetings. They didn’t ask for my help, or my thoughts, or seem to need me in any way as they proceed to build 16 houses.

After a few moments of reflection, I realized they were empowered. They were taking responsibility for their problems and finding local, sustainable solutions. They were taking community development in their own hands. They were in charge; they were empowered, they didn’t need me. It is at this moment when I knew that I had succeeded in this community. I went to the people, I lived with them, I learned from them, I loved them, and I started with what they knew and built with what they had. But I knew I had succeeded when the people said: “We have done this ourselves.”

#### ADVICE TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

You cannot do development for people; they must do that for themselves. What you can do is help them to change their way of thinking. You can help them gain confidence in themselves, to grow their belief in their ability to affect their world. You can help them recognize their resources, identify what holds them in poverty, and teach them how to solve their own problems with their own resources. When you do this, you unleash an unimaginable power. The community becomes an unstoppable force of change. Innovation, solutions to problems, teamwork – the community becomes alive with the energy of breaking the bonds of poverty.

I heard a story once about the slums of Kenya. A rich man walked through a slum and had pity on the people who lived there. He worked with local government and funded development for the community. He had piped in water brought onto every plot, provided electricity, and proper roads. He went back to his home country content that he had changed the face of poverty in this one Kenyan slum. A few years later, he visited the community to see their progress. To his dismay, they weren't there! He found that the poor had sold their plots of land to the middle class who built beautiful houses to go with the amenities of the area. The poor community was now further from the city and in a worse situation than they were before the man found them.

You cannot change the environment and think you are effecting change – you are not. You must start with the mind, endure through the long and painful relational process of worldview change from dependency and fatalism to a belief that they are valuable, and have power over their own lives. This mental change will, with time, move into a sincere heart and values change. This value shift will change the way people interact with each other and the way they live in the world, leading to them changing the world around them. They will embark on development, and it will be sustainable development that will last. They will own it, believe it, live it, and it will stay with them forever, transforming communities for generations.