Encouraging a *community-driven* response to climate change.

We all contribute to global warming in some way or another - and in many ways for most - whether we live a few years in the middle of London, or our home for life is a remote village in Africa. For many it can also be an unknowing or quite innocent contribution because they have no understanding of how critical the whole matter is … for themselves, but more importantly, for generations to follow.

What do we mean by *community-driven*? How can it assist in engaging people?

Across the globe, communities come in a myriad of configurations and sizes, ranging from small local groups focused on specific topics, through to large city districts, government departments, or private companies, and so on. The description of *community* can also be derived from sectorial foundations, such as a farmer's group, or fisherfolk, teachers or school students. One person can be a member of several different communities at the same time, let's say, as a village member, a farmer, a mother, a member of a youth group and a student.

Information on climate change could come to a person in an individualistic manner, or via one or more discrete communities. In the example above, the youthful farmer and village-based mother, may see relevant news clips on television, purely as an individual, but she might also receive information about climate change while taking part in an

evening class and then experience the crisis directly, as a distinct decrease in her farm income. To draw these threads together – TV overview, learning from studies, and personal experience – and thus to enable a more comprehensive understanding, is a task that can be supported and validated – driven - by community membership.

The question then arises as to the depth of understanding individuals need to have, when dealing with a subject as complex as climate change, in order to foster a situation where they are willing to respond with practical actions, and so contribute to solutions, within their own sphere of existence, and operation. Can it suffice just to realise that local climatic conditions are becoming more variable and less predictable; or Is it important to know the background science of carbon emissions and global warming, etc.? Perhaps most importantly, is there a crucial element, common to all communities, which if activated can foster a positive and appropriate response to the climate crisis?

Some answers derived from working with communities.

For the past 30 years I have worked to educate young people about *sustainable development*, which to put it in simple terms, is all about trying to live in a way which contributes to improving the world we live in, or at the very least, not degrading it any more than has been done in the past. For the past decade or so, my personal focus then became directed towards tackling climate change, as the most critical factor within the much broader field of *sustainable development.* This was a logical progression, because if solutions cannot be found to stop climate change, then achieving any sort of sustainable development will be impossible … and, in turn, working to achieve it becomes a nonsense.

The work spanned three markedly different countries – India, Kenya and the UK – with the primary target groups in each country being young people: school students and community-based youth. Teachers and group leaders were also key targets as they were the facilitators, while community members who lived in the areas which incorporated the schools and the youth groups, were tagged as secondary targets. The

methodologies developed over time and the corresponding responses that were received back from the target groups might serve in some ways to answer the questions above, related to community involvement and action.

Firstly, I came to realise that the educative process (how we learn) is just as important as the content (what we learn). In fact, in most cases, once the process is grasped fully it can apply to almost any content, meaning that it is of paramount importance to establish the most effective *way of learning*, right from the start. Content of course can also be crucial, thus taking the farmer example used above, it is extremely useful, for the farmer to understand why seasonal patterns are changing and how crop growth is affected by less water availability, etc. A range of relevant, explanatory information can thus be important to the whole.

This is where process and content come together to enable greater comprehension based on personal experience, which then fosters a heightened response. The farmer above will be likely to respond effectively, based on individual involvement at the local level. Climate change is an issue that has impacted on her life and her lifestyle: it is something she relates to with a passion that results in an enthusiastic and meaningful response. For want of a better term, this is classified as *experiential learning*; or learning from personal (and often quite passionate) involvement. In another example, a school principle may be alerted to climate change because families are unable to pay school fees, due to the phenomenon bringing about more poverty in the locality. Similarly, youth may experience unemployment due in part to climate change and then turn to a form of entrepreneurship which helps to adapt to new circumstances at the local level.

The other important aspect related to a transformative process for the individual, is a*ctive participation.* This is where community membership comes to the fore, to engender a participatory approach that connects individuals working together on a similar theme and motivates them to come up with practical and workable solutions to a problem. Through positive participation they begin to see problems as challenges and previously perceived drawbacks as opportunities with which to cultivate assets. An

example, in village Africa, would be to build alternative energy systems at the local level, so that non-renewable and costly energy sources are replaced by renewable energies such as solar, wind, or biomass. This creates a totally new and profitable business enterprise - for community members - from pre-existing problems. A problem becomes a challenge, that is then changed into an opportunity, which in the final analysis becomes an asset.

Developing the method with Kenyan schools and youth groups

When working with young people in Kenya we came to develop *experiential* and *participatory*, group learning processes. The learning was built around the concept of *risk reduction* and began at a very basic and general level, then gradually moved forward to build on perceived and quite specific opportunities related to the participant's locality. In the initial stages, learners involved were asked to develop a *Risk Reduction Traffic Light* related to local concerns. For this, they had to flag up danger areas (Red), or impending danger areas (Amber) whilst also noting where positive actions were being implemented (Green). A template of cross-cutting themes divided the overall picture into five critical themes: *Water, Food, Health, Energy* and *Waste*. Often two or more themes would connect, such as water and food, energy and waste.

Once a group of participants had identified the theme (or themes) most relevant to their locality (e.g., there might be a particular concern with food and health, or alternatively, waste) and where the highest risk of danger existed, then the same group was asked to build practical solutions for the danger areas that existed within the identified theme(s), at their local level. At the village school level, the solutions were often developed as simple examples to highlight critical issues, but at larger schools and in the youth group format the ideas that came from the group learning frequently became full-blown enterprises and sustainable businesses.

Through this work, with more than 600 schools and 25 community youth groups, hundreds of examples were developed that, in some way or other, focused on climate

change and sustainable development, at the local level. The individual projects usually centred on *adapting to climate change* (the phenomenon is here, so how do we deal with it), rather than *mitigating climate change* (reducing the existing problem), though, especially for the energy and waste themes - not cutting trees and using solar power, etc. – mitigation was also a critical factor.

My top ten of the more unique and memorable initiatives developed by schools and youth in Kenya were:

1. Purifying polluted water from school dormitories to irrigate vegetables.
2. Making broom-heads from waste plastic bottles.
3. Building a working greenhouse from used plastic bottles.
4. Manufacturing lampshades from broken umbrellas.
5. Harvesting rainwater from a public road to irrigate vegetables.
6. Producing food from a combined chicken and fish unit.
7. Converting waste plastics into ornaments, jewelry and household items.
8. Generating biogas from a biomass digester - for the teacher's kitchen.
9. Making shopping bags, handbags and mats from waste cloth materials.
10. Growing vegetables in vertical gardens on school fences and walls.

Thus, over a fifteen-year period (2001-2016) this quite focused learning process gradually evolved into a very workable tool for engaging communities to meet the challenges of climate change and sustainable development. The final project in the series (2016) connected to 400 private primary schools in impoverished districts (slums) of Nairobi and Mombasa, in Kenya, using and implementing all the accumulated knowledge and experience from preceding initiatives, and cascading the methodology through teacher trainers, to teachers, to students and then on to the wider community.

Transfer of the method through students and youth to the general community was an important element, to complete the cycle of learning … and related actions. Students and youth in effect became *Change-Makers* who stimulated practical and positive actions within their communities.

The method and its results were exposed to a wider audience (Kenya has over 30,000 school communities) through professional videos which were made and broadcast on terrestrial television. To see ten-year-old Mary leading the camera crew through narrow alleyways to her small slum dwelling, where outside the front door, her mother had learnt (from Mary) to grow vegetables and breed rabbits to feed her family, was a sight which made the previous fifteen years work extremely worthwhile!

FOOTNOTE: The methodology outlined above has shown itself to be both workable and durable, proving effective in getting complex concepts across to people of all ages and more importantly enabling those same people to respond, by developing practical and positive solutions that build opportunities at the local community level, to the immense challenges of tackling climate change and enabling sustainable development.

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