

SoCap10: International Development Track
Fort Mason, San Francisco
October 4 - 6, 2010

Panel Topic: It Takes a Village: Innovation From the Ground Up

Purpose: The focus is on Haiti, with organizations working in the fields of housing, agriculture, energy, water and economic development. A Haiti Huddle was to follow SoCap, on Thursday, October 7, at Fort Mason, involving many of the same participants.

Design/methodology/approach: Reports and expert opinions from panelists

Panelists:

Uma Viswanathan, Nouvelle Vie Haiti
Steve Lee, AIDG
Janell Kappor, Kleiworks
Eva-Lena Skalstad, Lapland Vuollerim

Summary: The best approach is to be resilient, not necessarily to grow. The model to follow is that a community must grow its own food, and then export its surplus. The goal is to create synergy by communicating and interweaving solutions among participants.

Haiti has been beset by a lack of public education and widespread disempowerment. Its resources and capacity must be developed in order to break the cycle of dependence. Haitians must believe in their future and feel they are equals to others in the international community. Organizations there are working to “train the trainers,” and develop water, energy, and other systems to enable citizens to meet their own needs.

Local and natural building materials are being used to build schools and other community based buildings. Working with the U.N., government and grassroots organizations, demonstration centers use materials such as bamboo, earth and wood to promote hands-on construction. Affordable and sustainable, grounds-up solutions in water, housing and energy are the focus. The challenge is to deliver technology that will scale, that supports entrepreneurs, and that are responsive to local needs.

It is difficult to obtain financing and credit for projects that may be too big for microfinance, and the incubation period for small businesses may be years. Major areas for research and development are in solar energy, biogas, and shelters. Communities need an information hub and a long-term commitment by organizations to create sustainable jobs and enterprises.

In order to compete commercially, small businesses need help in facing the risks which often occur from a top-down approach. At the same time, a ground-up approach may not allow for sufficient leverage. As an example, the agricultural sector may take years to develop. NGOs and others must build trust to confront barriers to scale.

Groups may work together part of the time and independently other times. Relationships must be resilient, and partners and individuals may change over time. Sometimes new people will join and others will leave a project. Collaboration is essential and the project's mission must be followed.

In the case of Haiti, where systems and infrastructure weren't in place, a top-down approach was required to address issues raised by the earthquake this year. More input is necessary in Haiti than in other areas such as Asia and Latin America, where leverage of projects has been successful.

After tools and training are supplied to and adopted by a community, organizations must step back and assess before scaling a project. A community's particular needs must be assessed, whether they result from a disaster or lack of infrastructure. In Haiti, it will be necessary to engage people for decades, the time which will be required to rebuild.

Keywords: Haiti, rebuilding, international development, international community, solar energy, biogas

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