



Social Action: Lessons Learned.
Rumeet Billan

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Introduction.

Some of the unintended consequences of the work that we are engaged in are the lessons that we never expected to learn. It can be challenging to orchestrate the range of stakeholders, variables, and perspectives that are involved, in addition to the external influences and internal agendas that you may or may not be aware of. Attempting to manage this in the most optimal way comes with learning opportunities that are not always anticipated.

Throughout my experience as a social entrepreneur, I have led initiatives that attempt to enable access to education in developing countries. I've been exposed to experiences that have taken me outside of my comfort zone, and challenged me to confront my personal biases. Along the way, I've come across many lessons, challenges, and inspirational stories.

I hope this is a helpful resource for leaders who are continuing to engage in initiatives that are changing our world. This eBook is a conversation that includes some of the lessons and challenges that I have encountered. I invite you to join the conversation.

Rumeet Billan



Vision.

It starts with a vision.

Being able to sense beyond what currently exists defines a visionary. Having the courage to not accept the status quo as a default position and continuing to question existing models is the cornerstone to improving processes and creating opportunities. In my opinion, a visionary can interpret the history, understand the present, and articulate a future that others may not yet understand.

In 2010, I met Anastasia (grade seven) who informed me that in the future she wanted to “improve the standard of education in Africa”. She went on to say, with conviction, “I want to mostly help the orphans read and write, and give them a place to live and make sure they go to school so they can become a distinguished person in their life. I want to change their lives”. Anastasia is an orphan in the rural community of Machakos, Kenya. She sees beyond today, beyond her current circumstance, and beyond the obstacles that she has faced herself. Anastasia has a vision. She has the courage to articulate it, and the confidence to believe in it.

“Vision is seeing what life could be like while dealing with life as it is...it is sensing what is felt, yet unarticulated, in the public soul and giving it a voice.”

-William Van Dusen Wishard

Social Action.

"Change happens when we listen to ourselves, when we give that voice credibility and when we trust that everything we have done has prepared us to take the first step." – Dev Aujla, Founder of DreamNow, www.dreamnow.org

Social action can be seen as organized activity that aims to improve and develop the capacity of individuals, communities, systems, and/or institutions.

I often hear people say, "I want to change the world". I have often said this myself. Regardless of whether we want to or not, the world is changing - constantly.

Being a positive change agent and attempting to make a social impact can be a daunting task. Encountering issues that are systemic in nature can create obstacles that may be difficult to manage.

I'd like to acknowledge that there is a certain type of vulnerability that comes with social action. Being open to acknowledging that there will likely be unintended consequences is important when navigating through the learning opportunities that promise to arise.

"Making a difference can only be accomplished by action, not by contemplation. May we each strive to leave behind at least one footprint that improves the quality of life for others around the world."

- Melania Chwyl, Founder of the Human Trafficking Awareness Project, www.melaniachwyl.com

Being the “Other”.



When travelling to a place that is unfamiliar, the feeling of being the “other” can be overwhelming. In some cases, it may be the first time the community you are working with has met an individual that is of a different ethnicity. There were times when I was referred to as a “white man”, because there were no other common words or labels to describe/indentify me based on my appearance. The colour of my skin, my mannerisms, body language, and the way that I spoke and presented myself was unfamiliar.

In some instances, the projects that I have been engaged in included working with communities that were mainly patriarchal. Additionally, there was a long history of systemic racism. Being young, female, and visibly different unquestionably presented its challenges.

Stepping outside of your comfort zone and stepping into unfamiliar territory will provoke unsettling emotions and can challenge your beliefs. This, coupled with adapting to a new environment, can create anxiety and leave you feeling vulnerable. Being able to navigate through these emotions is crucial, because it can also lead to invaluable learning opportunities.

Community Commitment.

Being at the ground level, it was apparent to me that although my intentions to understand the challenges of access to education were in the right place, my views on how to enable access were idealistic. The pre-conceived notions that I arrived with did not apply to the context of the communities that I was working with.

Recognizing and confronting my personal biases has been necessary in order to begin the process of understanding the context of the community that would be impacted by the proposed initiatives. In my experience, the hope has been to work with the community to develop a project based on their needs, as opposed to my personal assumptions. The aim is to create a sustainable model that will allow the project to operate without being dependent on donor funding. In this process, by interacting with the community and encouraging their involvement, I have been able to appreciate the importance and necessity of their commitment.

It is easy to make judgments and assumptions without fully understanding the context of a situation. Engaging the community will not only allow you to gain constructive feedback, but also the ability to gain support towards the vision. The community becomes an integral part of the process. In the long run, I believe that without their support, the project would likely dissipate.

Context.

Scope and context varies across communities, countries, and continents. Policies and strategies that may be applicable in an urban city may not succeed in the context of a rural community within the same region. Locally and internationally there are divides that exist. Awareness of the scope and the development of context-specific strategies are required when working towards alleviating barriers related to initiatives that aim to have a social impact.

I admittedly approached projects with a set of predetermined recommendations that I believed would improve access to education. I had to quickly learn that I was only bringing one perspective to the table that was based on my educational background and professional experience. By not having exposure personally or professionally to education systems outside of this scope, my views on enabling access to education were predisposed.

“It is not possible to borrow educational policy and practice from one context and transfer to another with any real hope of the transplant being successful, many governments and international agencies still do not appear to recognise this today.”¹

Essentially, I had to *de-learn* my biases in order to *re-learn* why I was there in the first place.

1. Crossley, M. & Watson, K. (2003). *Comparative and International Research in Education: Globalisation, Context and Difference*. New York: Routledge and Falmer

Communication.

The value of consistent, unfiltered, and authentic communication should not be underestimated.

An emphasis on articulation is crucial when technology is being used to communicate across borders. Attempting to articulate exactly what you would like to say via e-mail, without the assistance of body language and expressions, can create a disconnected discussion.



The ways in which we choose to communicate and the words we choose to represent our thoughts and ideas are constantly open to interpretation. Articulating in the most optimal way, while using technology as a tool to have your thought, idea, and/or recommendation expressed, can and will influence the project, perceptions, and possibilities.

In some cases, you may not only be communicating across borders, but also across purposes. *Who* you are corresponding with and the methods used to communicate will impact and steer the direction of the project. When information is filtered, withheld, or not articulated in a way that represents what one is attempting to say, the process of realizing the vision can be compromised.

Ask Questions.

Answers come in different packages. What we perceive to be the issue does not only depend on who we ask, but it is also dependent on the questions that are being asked.

Information received typically comes from a certain perspective that has been influenced. To assume that one perspective provides the full interpretation is not only misleading, but can be detrimental to your project, plan, or vision.

When engaging in social action projects, one should explore the other side of the equation to examine whether additional barriers are being created. Are we enabling x at the expense of y? Are we enabling access for one 'group' by disabling access for another?

Most organizations that are making a social impact are willing to provide information, when asked.

Some questions to consider:

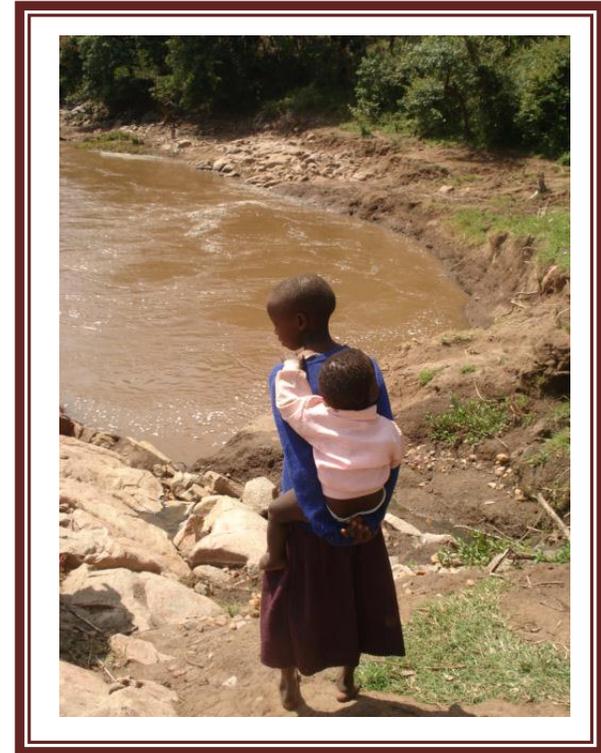
1. How is the needs assessment conducted?
2. How is commitment and involvement from the community ensured?
3. Who are *all* of the stakeholders involved?
4. What are other ways we can alleviate the barriers associated with this social issue?
5. What evaluation tools are used to measure successful implementation?
6. What processes are in place to measure the impact?
7. How will the project be sustained?

Balance.

Social action projects can be and have been emotionally demanding, time consuming, mentally draining, and physically taxing. The projects that I have been engaged in are not a part of my professional mandate; I am involved because they are a part of who I am.

Without support, attempting to take on the different facets of social action can chip away at your motivation. It is difficult to quantify the amount of time, energy, and expertise that can be involved with projects that aim to have a social impact. When experiencing extremes, observing injustice, and encountering culture shock (and/or reverse culture shock), you can be left feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and frustrated.

It has been about finding the middle ground between extremes. Although demanding, these projects and experiences can also help to provide balance. Personally, it has encouraged me to stay grounded, and I am able to experience a type of learning that I may not have been exposed to within the four walls of a classroom. This in itself has made it worthwhile.



How You Can Help.

Social action can be complex and multi-faceted. It takes on many forms and variations. Donating your time, expertise, and/or financially, are some of the ways in which one can support projects that help to make a social impact. In some cases, building awareness of a social issue can create the most impact, and can leave a lasting impression.

Based on my experience, an agent of positive change requires being open to different perspectives, confronting personal biases, asking questions, and creating solutions that are built on existing models. Like many things, it is a learning process that continues beyond a single experience.

Although we do not have an algorithm, prescription, or recipe with the answers to perfect our imperfect world; we have the opportunity to ask questions, engage in critical dialogue, and continue the conversation. We can start by building awareness and working towards the goal of empowering, inspiring, and learning.

We have the ability to leave an impression. Based on your circumstance, it is up to you on how you choose to be a part of the process.

Additional Thoughts.

In our world there are millions of children who are waiting to become the first generation in their families to complete a primary education. Our next generation of leaders require the opportunity that many of us have been privileged to exercise as our right. Creating sustainable solutions that are context-specific will help to ensure inclusive education not only for today, but also for tomorrow.



I acknowledge that I have been fortunate and privileged to have had exposure to diverse experiences that have shaped my perspective. I have learned many lessons along the way, and as my scope continues to transform, I look forward to the next challenge, lesson, and experience. I hope to continue being a part of projects that help to actualize the change in our world that I believe is so necessary.

We have the choice of exposing ourselves to experiences that can enrich our perspective and have a social impact. These experiences will essentially shape the way you perceive our world. The question then becomes, which experiences will you choose to expose yourself to?

I encourage you to imagine the possibilities.

Contact.

Rumeet Billan is the President of Jobs in Education, and is embarking on a PhD in Higher Education at the University of Toronto. As a social entrepreneur, she has contributed to school building initiatives in Africa and South America. In 2010, Rumeet's vision for enabling education led to the creation, development, and implementation of *The Toor Centre for Teacher Education* in the rural community of Nzeveni, Kenya. At the age of 25, she received the honour of being named one of Canada's Top 100 Most Powerful Women presented by the Women's Executive Network. She was also selected to represent Canada at the 6th Annual UNESCO International Leadership Programme: A Global Intergenerational Forum.

Rumeet's focus is to contribute to the field of higher education in a meaningful way by integrating her career, doctoral studies, and passion for enabling education.

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