

Imagination is the Key to Ending Poverty

Richmond Msowoya

Richmond Msowoya, an ageless wisdom student, is a Livelihoods & Economic Inclusion Consultant with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR), formerly based in Malawi and now in Sudan. Previously he has worked with the Canadian Uniterra Program in Malawi linking volunteers who gift their expertise, knowledge and know-how to build the capacities of some of the poorest communities, creating job opportunities and encouraging entrepreneurship. Through his many years of work as an economic empowerment specialist in Malawi and southern Africa he has facilitated livelihood interventions that have benefited over 51,000 refugees and their host communities.

The following edited extracts are taken from the transcript of a longer talk he presented during the World Goodwill Seminar on 6 November 2021 on the theme: Imagination and Social Regeneration. A video of the full talk is available at: worldgoodwill.org/video#rm ; further information on the theme and the seminar at: worldgoodwill.org/regeneration.

As a student of the Ageless Wisdom I have been working for most of my adult life on interventions to lift refugees and extremely poor households out of poverty. So, this focus on Imagination and regeneration has caused me to think deeply. International organisations, local actors, governments, and UN agencies have been working to end poverty for decades, yet nothing seems to change for the better and grand challenges remain. So, what is wrong with our strategies?

Drawing on the esoteric teachings I look on imagination as the key component to ending poverty. While many see the imagination as fantasy, essentially unreal, those with discerning wisdom know that it is the seed of the future around which reality can materialize. It was through the power of imagination that God Himself, or Allah (the Great I Am) created the universe – designed the sky, the earth, trees, animals.

It is undeniable that we influence the future by our thoughts. Through imagination and visualization, thoughts create the ideas and circumstances that help us begin to control our outward life in extraordinary ways. This is what happens for those who work in the field of social regeneration. The definition that is often used for social regeneration is “about ensuring that the places where people live, now and in the future, create new opportunities, promote wellbeing and reduce inequalities so that people have better lives, in stronger communities, and achieve their potential. “

The absence of cooperation is the key to society’s failures. The culture of individualism and the pursuit of wealth has undermined humanity’s collective path to freedom and justice. So, we need to call forth the imagination as we consider the regeneration and re-igniting of a spirit of companionship between people, communities, nations, and between humanity and the living earth. Only this can lead to freedom and success for the excluded and disenfranchised and for all human beings.

But how can students of the ageless wisdom help to foster this spirit of imagination? In my opinion, we nurture this within ourselves through the practice of daily meditation, study, and participating in online events like this annual seminar. And as we do this, we find that the call to serve humanity becomes dearer and dearer everyday – like a cymbal ringing in our ears: service to those that suffer poverty, service to those who suffer unemployment, distress.

The two approaches that I have found to work best to lift poor people out of poverty have been a market based/ systems approach and the graduation approach. I believe that these are models of the future or futuristic models. In market based/systems approach, interventions are designed to link the income-generating activities/ business entrepreneurship activities of poor people directly to markets, trying to eliminate the middlemen who traditionally buy their produce at very low prices thereby exploiting them. During the past 19 years, I have facilitated the linking of small-scale producers in Malawi to international markets in the tea, legumes and dairy industries, and have seen enormous changes this has brought to poor farmers.

Interventions using the graduation approach are designed to lift extremely poor families out of extreme poverty. For a limited time, say 6, 12 or 18 months, depending on the nature of the intervention, consumption support in the form of cash is provided so that poor family meet basic needs as they participate in various income generating activities. . During this period equipment/asset transfer and training is provided to help families generate their own income, plan their finances, and develop the skills needed to be self-sufficient. At the end of the prescribed period, financial support ends. By this time financial support(consumption support) is discontinued, the family will have already started earning sufficient income to meet their basic needs.

These two approaches have been proven to create lasting, systemic changes impacting the material conditions or behavior of large numbers of people. This stimulates crowding in by other players in the markets where poor people participate. This can be applied everywhere, particularly in the agricultural sector. As part of my work with UNHCR, interventions at the Refugee camp at Dzaleka in Malawi and surrounding host communities have transformed the area. In Malawi, as in many parts of the world, there is high resistance to refugees. Refugees' are restricted to live in large camps and cannot obtain wage employment. The livelihood support we have provided a portion to the ratio of 50:50 between refugees in the camp and surrounding host communities, helping the refugees create marketable products using the skills they bring with them and working with local small-scale farmers to enhance income earning opportunities. As a result, the area has become a vibrant market hub with traders coming from surrounding districts and neighbouring cities (even from across the border in Zambia) to buy the wide range of goods produced by farmers and camp residents. It has been transformational.