

Counting the Cost and Reward of Community Development

By Adam L. Smith

Adam L. Smith (pseudonym) is from the United States. Since completing his master's degree in intercultural studies, he has served for 25 years in church planting activities in Asia and the Middle East among least-engaged Muslim peoples. Throughout this time, he has worked in humanitarian and development initiatives serving the poor.



Those serving on the field for any length of time have seen many roles and models which workers take on as their means for remaining long term in a country. After the Lord called me to the least engaged for the spread of the gospel, he led me to teammates who were doing community-development initiatives. While I was soon convinced of the effectiveness of development work for access and engagement, the Lord taught me to respect and appreciate the varied ways He leads each of us into His work among the nations.

Community development opens significant doors for gospel ministry, but not without time, effort, and wise management of staff, team responsibilities, and projects. This article unpacks some of the central principles I have learned from two decades of experience of integrating community development and church planting (CP) in three very different Muslim countries.

A Powerful Door of Access and the Proper Motivation

Doing community development enables incredible access to a community and its families. While entry to a country may be easy, it can

be much more difficult to access a particular population or region within that country. Registering a non-governmental organization (NGO) usually results in obtaining the formal and legal permission from the government to operate in the country among the people you are called, which carries potential for long-term access. While each situation has its own history of NGOs, both good and bad, NGOs are generally acceptable entities in society for helping the poor, providing medical care, and offering other social development activities. In addition to access, doing development work enables workers to deeply engage with people and the community over time, which opens doors for ministry.

For example, think of the significant amount of time and involvement with people, in their community context, required to address the following issues:

- poverty through business development
- children with disabilities through rehabilitation and social inclusion
- sickness through community health
- child mortality through midwifery and life-saving skill training
- desalination and drought through agriculture development

Community development touches on some of the most heart-wrenching issues families and communities face. In those contexts, our efforts and presence open opportunities to advance the gospel that workers may never have had if not for the project.

Development work should not be a purely pragmatic means of gaining access to people's lives. We must believe that it is part of fulfilling our calling. When we look at all the work and challenges involved, a person must be convinced that the Lord wants them to do this development work. Also, we must be motivated by the love of Christ. When dealing with the many challenges and experiencing people's pain and suffering, it is the love of Christ that maintains our hope and keeps us from becoming cynical. The love of Christ is the foundation that compels us to work for healing, wholeness, and transformed lives.

The Cost of NGO Access

Many workers need to undergo several mindset shifts to prepare them for development work. First, it is important to recognize that obtaining access and engagement via an NGO comes at a cost (literally and figuratively). In most situations, there are several government requirements to maintain the NGO's registration:

- rent an office
- use a proper accounting system
- be financially audited every year
- submit government reports for both the previous and coming year
- renew the NGO's registration paperwork
- obtain approvals for vehicle purchases and annual registrations

The list goes on. Every country is unique, but all have administrative requirements that must be fulfilled.

In my experience, there is a sizable amount of project work (beyond administration) that is required to reach the tipping point of project effectiveness and impact. Before that point, the project just putters along and the opportunities for relationship-impact are few. When a sufficient (usually significant) amount of man hours and money are put into the project, there is a point at which the opportunities for ministry to people become exponential, and often more than the team can pursue. The worker's dilemma of "I'm trying to find a way to build relationships with people" becomes a thing of the past. Now they are praying for which ones they can actually follow up with and invest in. For many, this is hard to believe on the front end before they experience it for themselves.

Is it Worth the Time? A Story

In my personal experience, one of the top—and very legitimate—concerns of people interested in joining our team is how much time

they are required to spend working each week. However, this is driven by incorrect framing of the matter. Our development projects are not a “platform” to be exploited in order to otherwise do “real” ministry; they are an absolutely integral part of the ministry. For our team, development is the framework in which ministry takes place. Those who have stuck with it long enough can testify to the significant open doors into lives and communities which it produces, often beyond what we could have imagined beforehand.

This can be illustrated by a story. I was focused on serving a minority people group in a country in a remote area in which that group was almost 100% of the population. The only reason we could remain there was because, in the years prior, my team leader completed the lengthy registration process and established a project. To continue that legacy, we worked 35 hours a week in the project. A number of times, workers came from the capital, where the minority people group was a very small percentage of the population, and thus challenging for workers in that city to connect with and learn their language. They heard about us and would come to see if they could join our team.

The visitors were always amazed at the amount of access and engagement opportunities. However, they also saw the amount of work required to maintain our projects in order to live there. Almost all returned to the capital, because the time and effort needed to stay in the region was much more than they were willing to entertain. I don’t criticize their decisions, but offer it as an example of how challenging it can be for some to believe that the trade-off of time investment pays off in richness of gospel opportunities.

There were a couple of positive outcomes from our time-intensive development efforts which are worth noting. The highlight was the establishment of a church after seven years —before all the expats were forced to leave. This occurred in an area where no church had existed for more than a thousand years.

Another positive outcome was from a local brother, who was employed by us. After he believed, he didn't agree with our philosophy of work. Because we were fellow Christians, he wanted us to be lenient with time, use work hours for ministry, and to give away supplies or equipment. However, that would have been contrary to our legal registration. After some time, he was detained and interrogated for over a month. After being released, he was immensely thankful, because he could always answer that the organization only did the project work for which it was licensed and not religious work. The project focused on its legally defined objectives, while the gospel spread informally through work relationships.

Furthermore, since he was a leader in the new church, his experience shaped how the local leaders understood ministry. The leaders promoted bivocational ministry for their context, even though there were other foreign Christian groups offering full-time ministry models with foreign support. Subsequently, those church leaders sent people into other cities in the area as bivocational church planters.

Local Staff, Vehicles, and Money

In addition to accepting the reality and value of the work required, workers need to adopt a second mindset shift: embracing the necessity and benefit of hiring local staff. Most of the time, a team thinks there's no need to hire people because the team members can speak the language and do everything themselves. While that may be technically true, it doesn't take into account the amount of time and struggle needed to do things which locals could do with much less time and effort.

Over the years, many frustrated individuals and teams have sought my help with government-process-related issues. The first thing I tell them is to spend money to hire a local employee. Sometimes it takes a bit of convincing, because we don't go to the field expecting to hire employees as part of our calling. Inevitably, after hiring someone, they thank me,

wishing they had done it sooner. The employee is able to get things done so much faster and cheaper, and the expatriate is then freed up to do other things. This advantage can apply to any role in the NGO.

Strategic thinking is crucial regarding the person you hire. First and foremost, the person must be qualified for the job, regardless of their beliefs. You may want a Christian because of ministry activities, but that is subsequent to them being qualified to do the job. Ideally, you find qualified people who are also favorable towards your CP vision. Then, the extension of the gospel has the immediate potential to extend through them as well. Of course, finding such people is difficult. Our employees are a mix of believers and not-yet believers. When you have not-yet believers, you have a unique opportunity for them to see something not easily ignored: the gospel worked out in your life and work.

When people want to run a new project with us, I tell them that, in order for the project to have impact, you need three things: local staff, vehicles, and money. That may not sound very spiritual, but I've been doing this long enough to see that without those three things, the opportunities for engagement and impact in a community are minimal, and they move at a snail's pace. Having the resources of full-time people and the means to travel to the community means more time in the context with the people you are wanting to serve and more time working towards your goals.

Strategically Designing Projects

While we are a Christian NGO, we don't do religious activities as part of our project work because of our context. There are contexts in the Middle East where this can be done, but it's not available in ours. This doesn't mean that we are secular in our work; we are seen as Christians who practice our faith. However, project participants don't come away from our activities thinking, "They are trying to spread Christianity." Following up on spiritually-interested individuals/families, facilitating

discovery Bible study (DBS) groups, establishing discipleship groups, etc., are all done outside of the project. We spend a lot of time and resources to do quality, positive development work. As such, it can be easy to perceive us as running an NGO simply for visas and legitimacy in the country while seeking ministry opportunities elsewhere.

That, however, is not the route we have taken. Instead, we've designed our projects to accomplish quality development work that also lends itself to informal opportunities to minister to the very people that we meet through our NGO work. One way to accomplish both is to identify in the culture where it is easier and acceptable to have spiritual conversations, and then to make logical project activities to be in that location. In our context, the optimal place for spiritual conversations is generally with the family in the home. One example is that we require our local project staff to visit participants to survey how the project is affecting their lives. We use a questionnaire for gathering, monitoring, and evaluating data on the project's outcomes, which is necessary for project improvement and reporting back to donors. When the staff person is not a believer, they simply visit the home and do the questionnaire. When the person is a believer, they do the survey and also see how the Lord may lead them to minister to the family's needs during the visit.

Don't Exploit!

It's important to address the fact that people in vulnerable life circumstances can be exploited. We have all heard of horrible situations where NGO staff have taken advantage of such people for personal benefit. We have child and adult protection policies, regular training, and accountability for our staff to counter exploitation. We are also careful that any time we offer to pray for someone, share from the Scriptures, or invite to a DBS, we are very clear there are zero strings attached. People must understand that their response has no effect on their benefit from the project activities.

Realistic Expectations

With all the work involved, teams will inevitably realize that no one team member is able to do everything. The amount of administrative and project work to maintain the NGO demands that some teammates spend more (or even all) of their time doing those responsibilities. This can sometimes be accomplished by recruiting members who are willing to leave the business world and understand that administration is their service to the success of the team. At other times, administrative responsibilities can be rotated every year so that all team members have both an understanding of that part of the work, as well as empathy for those carrying that load. Every team and context are different, but one thing that is constant is that there is an amount of routine administrative work that must be done to facilitate everyone's role, engagement with the community, and ministry follow-up opportunities.

Conclusion

Doing the field work of community development in a pioneer mission situation can certainly be difficult and time-consuming. Many workers shy away from the task of setting up and running an NGO required to support such an endeavor, because they see it as a distraction from their gospel calling. However, there are great benefits when workers adjust their mentality and see community development as the framework in which ministry can take place. Rather than a negative that simply "takes up their time," properly-structured NGO activities, along with wise choices of local staff and distribution of team responsibilities, provides an environment of rich and abundant ministry opportunities in underserved, untouched communities.

Questions for Conversation

1. What length of time is reasonable to invest to gain high-quality access to a community? Six months? One to two years? More?

2. How does the author advise integrating community development and church-planting goals? Is it possible to do both well, and if so, what could that look like in your context?
3. What are advantages and disadvantages of having unbelievers as staff in a field organization?