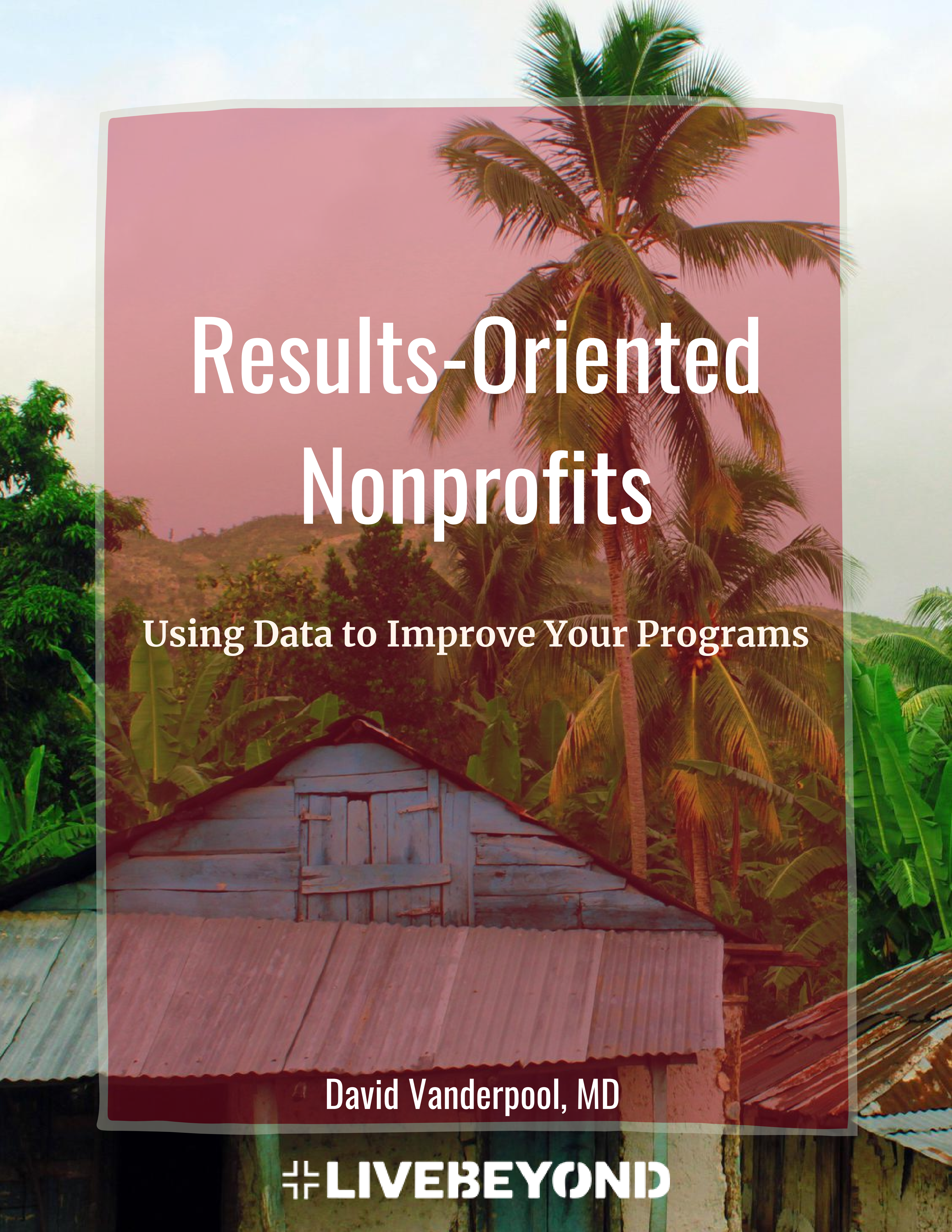

Results-Oriented Nonprofits

Using Data to Improve Your Programs

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LIVEBEYOND

Introduction

"You hit what you aim at, and if you aim at nothing you will hit it every time."
- Zig Ziglar

My team members often say that I get "hit by the good idea fairy" twenty times before I get to work in the morning. Of course, at the time, I think these ideas are all Nobel Prize-worthy; it's not until we discuss them later that most are appropriately thrown into the trash can. I believe that many of us have similar experiences. Indeed, many churches, nonprofit organizations, and other groups have many seemingly great ideas. Still, without a proper model for testing these ideas, they are often implemented without regard for the outcomes.

Often, an organization's leaders have ideas that won't undergo rigorous functional testing because their positions intimidate the people responsible for their implementation.
At best, this results in wasted time, energy, and resources and demoralizes the organization's workforce. In the wrong situations, such as the international nonprofit community, these actions can do tremendous harm to the people they are tasked to serve.

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Chapter 1

THE ASSESSMENT PHASE

"Garbage in, garbage out. Or rather more felicitously: the tree of nonsense is watered with error, and from its branches swing the pumpkins of disaster."

- Nick Harkaway, The Gone-Away World

The initial assessment of the problems that we aim to address is arguably the most crucial of all. Whether we are addressing supply chain issues for a manufacturing company, financial difficulties in a church, or border disputes between countries, we must accurately assess the problems. To successfully evaluate the area in which we want to work, we must minimize the inherent biases that we all have and maximize the accuracy of our appraisal of the situation. To accomplish this, we must avoid these several pitfalls.

The Long Distance Trap

The first step to assimilate these principles is to determine what needs there are in the area you serve. One can't successfully negotiate this step from a distance. You have to be there to understand the needs. The problems and solutions become much clearer when you study them in person, and spending time walking with the people you serve often pays many dividends.

To fully understand the needs of the people with whom you work, you must have the ability to collect, analyze, and communicate the data pertaining to the problem to other constituents. At LiveBeyond, we have developed a digital assessment tool to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the communities in which we work. This assessment tool uses the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals, Sustainable Development Goals, and other guides to help us understand the areas where we can most effectively improve the lives of the indigenous people. As we walk through villages, we talk with the residents and note such things as their proximity to clean water sources, sanitation practices, and access to appropriate medical care. We ask about women's health issues, nutritious food resources, and adequate housing. Our database includes several hundred data points, and when the analysis is complete, we have a clearer picture of the needs of the people.

The Myopia Trap

The first step in this process is to collect as much information from as many disparate sources as possible. Often, when we see a problem arise, we jump to immediate conclusions

because of inherent biases that beset us all. This is especially true when we've previously solved a similar problem that seems identical but has significant differences that warrant further consideration. These nuances may more readily surface as we explore the problem from different points of view.

For example, at first glance, a manufacturing company's supply chain disruption may seem to be due to the inability of the dock workers to load the delivery trucks for the distribution of the product expeditiously. Management may verify this position, but upon further discussion with the dockworkers themselves, you may find that the problem lies with transport availability rather than staffing. The solution becomes more apparent with input from those with more direct knowledge of the problem.

We see this commonly in the international nonprofit community. Low-income countries often suffer from a lack of access to healthcare. A cursory analysis may suggest that what is needed is for a nonprofit organization to recruit and bring in American doctors and nurses to supply this supposed deficit. However, a complete assessment of the problem may reveal that the indigenous healthcare professionals cannot perform their duties because of insufficient access to medications and related supplies. In this case, bringing in outside medical professionals is harmful to the community because the local doctors cannot compete with the better-supplied visitors. The initial solution doesn't solve the problem and has second-order adverse effects on the indigenous medical professionals.

The Culture Trap

The culture trap occurs when people from one culture strive to solve others' problems in an entirely different culture. The solutions from a politically free and affluent developed culture often fail in developing countries' repressed and impoverished cultures. We see this frequently in mass feeding programs from the United States. The United States, replete with surplus crops, ships food into low-income countries to solve the rampant starvation. The

indigenous farmers then suffer from lower marketplace prices due to the flooding of low-cost or free food from wealthier countries. Better, more culturally sensitive solutions include maximizing local food purchases and improving farming techniques.

A key to overcoming the culture trap is to include local stakeholders in the assessment phase. The indigenous people often have a clear understanding of the problems they face every day, and they will bring the richness of the history of their region to the table. They will also be able to discuss the problems and the solutions that were previously tried and failed.

The Amateur Trap

As long-term missionaries, we have seen many people come to low-income countries for a week, a month, or even a year and completely misunderstand the local problems and the appropriate solutions. Many times this confusion stems from a lack of education or experience in developing nations. Some are teachable and wind up thriving in their new home; however, most are unable to transition to the ways of the host culture. We have found that those who come to a foreign culture multiple times for short periods are prone to reinforce their biases with each successive trip. These inherent biases produce inaccurate assessments and wildly inappropriate solutions.

Fortunately, today, we have access to a significant body of scientific research that brings expertise and experience to our fingertips. The World Health Organization, for instance, is an excellent source of expert guidance regarding the needs and applications of health-related programming in low and middle-income countries. This information is well researched and can serve as a model for organizations that want to excel in healthcare in resource-poor environments. There are countless other resources available that can bring expertise to the table and thwart the effects of the amateur trap.

The central and local governments are a treasure trove of information

for the situation in your host country. They can alert you to registration and permit requirements that they enforce in their country, and they will have an idea of grants that may be available to finance your efforts. They will tell you what programs they have already implemented in your area of work and what non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are already working there. Working in concert with other like-minded NGOs can enhance your work and increase your effectiveness significantly.

There are many other facets to the assessment phase that are important but beyond this book's scope. I hope to cover these in more detail in another format.

Chapter 2

Program Selection

"Any program is only as good as it is useful."
- Linus Torvalds

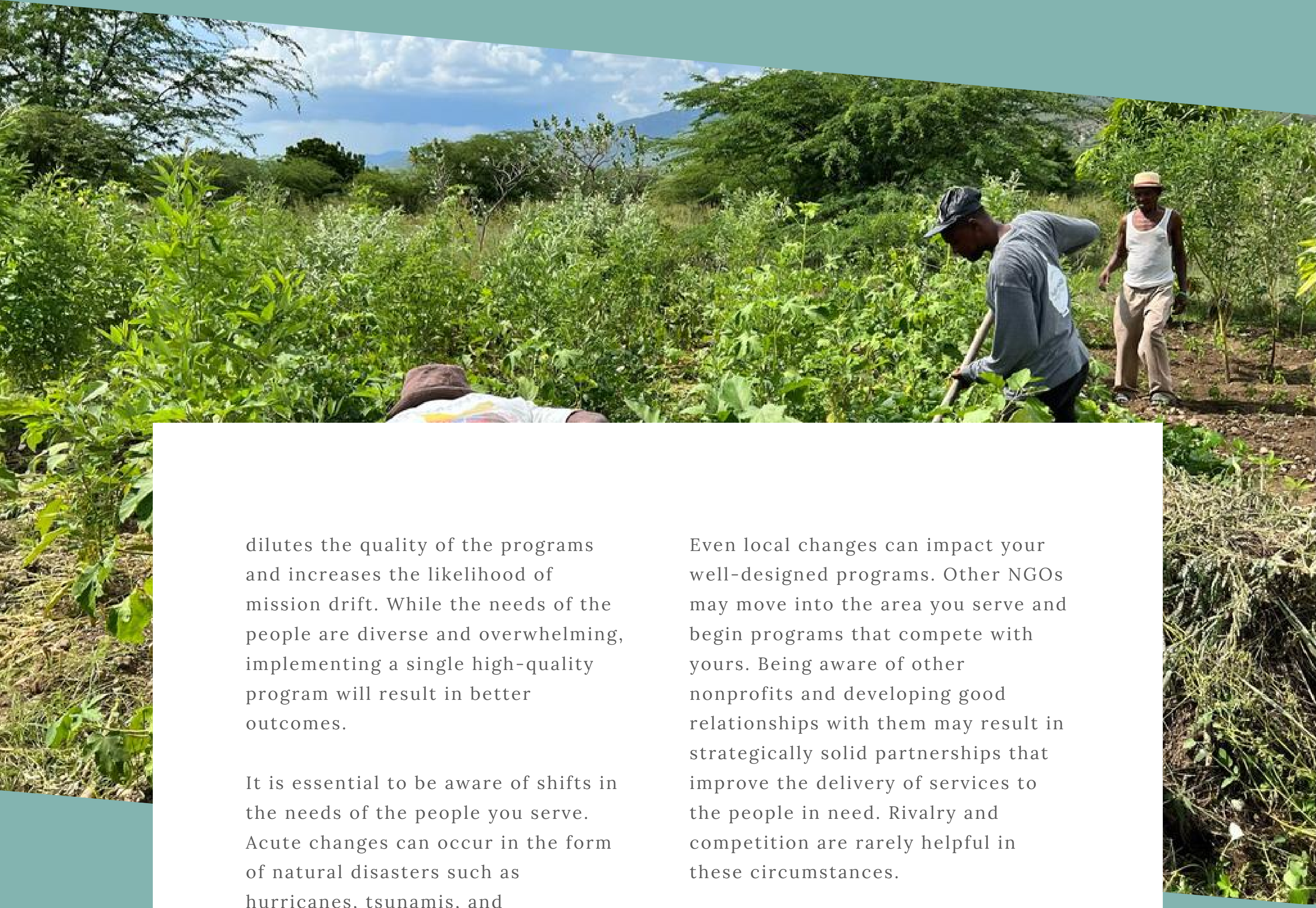
"For every action, there is an equal & opposite government program."
- Bob Wells

After analyzing the information gleaned from the assessment phase, it's time to decide which programs to implement. This decision can be tricky since many of us want to solve all the problems at once. First, it's essential to see which of the needs intersect your skillset and budget. This step requires a lot of thought to provide the appropriate solutions in the best way possible. It's also important to consider whether you will have the funds to see this program through to completion; an unfinished program is costly and benefits no one.

Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, in their excellent book, *Extreme Ownership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win*, describe the technique they call "Prioritize and Execute" as an essential element of decision-making, planning, and execution in any situation. "To implement Prioritize and Execute in any business, team, or organization, a leader must:

• Evaluate the highest priority problem.
• Layout in simple, clear, and concise terms the highest priority effort for your team.
• Develop and determine a solution, and seek input from key leaders and the team where possible.
• Direct the execution of that solution, focusing all efforts and resources toward this priority task.
• Move on to the next highest priority problem. Repeat.
• When priorities shift within the team, pass situational awareness both up and down the chain.
• Don't let the focus on one priority cause target fixation. Maintain the ability to see other problems developing and rapidly shift as needed." (1)

This decision-making rubric aptly describes the basic process needed in the mission field as well. Simplicity and clarity of vision are essential in determining best practices models that will improve the lives of the people you serve. Seeking input from your constituents will help ensure buy-in from the indigenous people. Perhaps one of the most overlooked parts of this process is focusing your team's attention and resources on the one most high-priority program at a time. Trying to implement multiple programs simultaneously



dilutes the quality of the programs and increases the likelihood of mission drift. While the needs of the people are diverse and overwhelming, implementing a single high-quality program will result in better outcomes.

It is essential to be aware of shifts in the needs of the people you serve. Acute changes can occur in the form of natural disasters such as hurricanes, tsunamis, and earthquakes. The devastation that these disasters wreak can quickly undermine even the best-laid plans. For instance, more urgent healthcare, clean water, and sanitation issues may supplant children's educational needs. Civil unrest and war can cause enormous survival challenges necessitating medical and sanitation support. The disruption of necessary supply chains, which diminish access to basic necessities and impair free-market processes, can negatively impact economies in the long term. Though these catastrophes appear suddenly, the economic corrections can take decades to realize.

Even local changes can impact your well-designed programs. Other NGOs may move into the area you serve and begin programs that compete with yours. Being aware of other nonprofits and developing good relationships with them may result in strategically solid partnerships that improve the delivery of services to the people in need. Rivalry and competition are rarely helpful in these circumstances.

1.Willink, Jocko; Babin, Leif (2015-10-20). ExtremeOwnership: How U.S. Navy SEALs Lead and Win (pp. 162-163). St. Martin's Press. Kindle Edition.

Chapter 3

The Planning Phase

"Plans are of little importance, but planning is essential." - Winston Churchill

"No plan survives contact with the enemy." - Helmuth von Moltke (1800–1891)

The planning process needs to incorporate all levels of expertise within your organization. As organizations grow, the leadership often becomes detached from the workers in the field. Sometimes, in the planning process, leaders underutilize the very people aware of problems that will negatively impact this planning phase. This disconnect undermines the organization's responsiveness to shifting priorities and weakens its overall response.

A better approach incorporates fluid vertical integration of all participants in both the planning and assessment phases. The constant evaluation and assessment of programs up and down the organizational chart while considering the outcomes' variables will benefit the programs' constituents.

If your program involves construction, for instance, there may be licenses and permits that you will need to obtain before the commencement of your project. Often, bureaucracy and corruption mire these permitting and registration processes. Without the input of local leaders, the initiative could fail; incorporating these best practices models before the implementation phase is crucial to the success of your program.

Aligns with Your Skill Sets

Before starting a project, make sure that your skill sets and experience align with the intended project. We have seen organizations build needed hospitals without any previous experience in these tasks. Often the buildings are unusable because of some design flaw that prevented their proper implementation. Best practices models include meeting with the appropriate government ministers to understand the building requirements in advance of any construction. Even in low-income countries, the government may have building specifications for hospitals and schools. If an organization builds a building that doesn't conform to these specifications, the government may not allow them to use it. In this case, money and time are wasted, and the people you are serving remain without the vital service you hoped to provide.

Aligns with Your Mission Statement

The project must align with your mission statement. Many times, organizations with no experience will build schools. Just because a project is needed does not mean that your organization is the right one to implement it. Perhaps, a better solution is to partner with another organization with extensive experience in this field before launching out on your own.

Project Management

Using a project management tool or mind mapping tool is essential in understanding the steps needed to ensure the program's viability. For instance, if the program requires importing critical equipment, you must understand the shipping challenges in the country where you work. In Haiti, for example, corruption, theft, and heavy import duties complicate shipping. An organization may need to obtain a franchise license from the government to avoid import duties, which can take years. The ability to map out these challenges will better prepare your organization for success.

Budgeting

Putting together an accurate budget is essential to the success of your program. You may be able to glean budgetary advice from government websites or other organizations experienced in the matter. Many factors make accurate budgets difficult in low-income countries. Sometimes, proper basic building materials aren't available in the country. This may mean that you will have to import these materials or fabricate them yourself. In Haiti, it can be challenging to procure structurally sound cement, for instance. In some cases, it may become necessary to set up your own cement mixing operation to produce concrete that can withstand frequent earthquakes. This increases the cost of building but may save lives during the next major earthquake. At our base in Haiti, we have built all of our habitable structures to earthquake-resistant standards, which was more expensive but well worth it in the long run.

Goals

As you delineate the ideas behind your program, you must consider the

goals that will make your program successful. These goals should support the overall mission of your project. In other words, if your task is to supply the local community with healthcare, then your goals may include improving access to healthcare for the general population, improving maternal health, and improving child health. You can then measure the success of these goals with outcome data from the various facets of your program. For instance, if your goal is to improve access to healthcare, then an appropriate outcome measure would demonstrate more patients coming to your clinic each year. If your plan includes improving maternal healthcare, showing diminished mortality rates over time would support your goal. You must include these outcome measures in your planning phase to be successful. If you merely tack them on to the program after implementation, your constituents may not accept them, and they may be more likely to fail. I believe that demonstrating improved outcomes is essential for every organization. We must prove that what we do works at every level.

Training

If your program will require people with specific skills to succeed, make sure that these people are available. When planning a budget, you must carefully consider cost overruns that are common in these situations. Developing a training protocol early in your program development will allow efficient scaling of the program as you grow. Manuals, videos, and software applications are valuable tools to ensure that your team members understand the goals and implementation of the program. In areas of low literacy rates, you may need to write songs or perform plays to demonstrate the basic ideas of the program.

Chapter 4

Measuring What Matters

"In God we trust; all others must bring data."

- W. Edwards Deming

The idea behind the measuring of outcomes is to test the quality of our program concept. We use these measurements to improve the results of our programs by suggesting changes. If we plan the perfect program, then no such changes are necessary. Of course, none of us can design the ideal program, so we must rely on data to help us improve. This requires frequent feedback from our outcome measurements and tweaks to our programs.

Outcome measurements should be studied weekly, but changes to the program should be delayed up to three months unless the data reveals an impending emergency. This longer interval controls for aberrant data spikes and valleys that may cause over or under correction. This interval also keeps the program implementers from feeling micromanaged.

The choice of the individual parameters to measure is a difficult one. On the one hand, some will throw every possible metric into the pool. This makes for highly cumbersome data collection and belies a proper understanding of the relationship between the measures and the targeted goal. I believe that it is best to start with just a few measurements that will directly support the evaluation of the program. Creating parameters that more broadly define the program's success enables you to add more granular data collection as your program becomes more detailed.

Outcome measures aren't limited to direct programmatic applications. Utilizing outcome measures at all levels of an organization reveals their actual benefits. When we link goals and outcome measures at all levels of the organization, the entire staff becomes unified as one team, working together to achieve common goals.

The solutions will become more evident when we seek to improve our constituents' lives through outcome measures as our measurements become more granular. For example, when we began our maternal health program, we mainly focused on improving maternal mortality. Our

initial assessments showed us that the women were malnourished. When we corrected the mothers' nutritional deficiencies, we began to see immediate improvements. These improvements started to plateau after a while, forcing us to delve deeper into the problem. We understood the solutions more clearly when we started measuring the various causes of maternal mortality. This increased granularity of our measurements helped us understand how to implement effective solutions to maternal mortality.

This constant cycle of measurement and program improvement produces best practices models which maximize the benefit to the people you serve.

Chapter 5

Implementing Outcome Measures to Prove Results

"Plans are only good intentions unless they immediately degenerate into hard work."
- Peter Drucker

As good stewards of our donor's funds, we must continually demonstrate outcome measures to prove our work's quality. These outcome measures should be qualitative instead of merely quantitative. For example, if we only show the number of children fed in our nutrition program, we don't address whether they improved their nutritional status.

A more important indicator would be that 95% of children in our nutrition program achieved the proper weight for their age and height. This metric speaks more to the quality of improving the children's nutritional status rather than merely showing the number of children fed. Of course, it can be important to describe the numbers of children fed in a nutrition program to establish its breadth. Still, it quickly becomes necessary to increase the granularity of the data by diving deeper into the solutions you offer.

As we establish root cause analyses of the problems we plan to solve, we find ever-deepening solutions necessary to provide the benefits we desire. For instance, using our earlier maternal mortality example, it became apparent that we needed to understand the causes of the mortality. An analysis of our own data showed that these women were dying of hemorrhage, hypertensive syndrome, and sepsis. We then used the World Health Organization's data to inform the planning phase of our program. Our focus changed from simply nutritional supplementation to eliminating hemorrhage, hypertension, and sepsis. We then created outcome measures for each of these facets of maternal mortality to continue to improve the quality of life for these mothers. As we improved these essential aspects of maternal mortality, we saw the overall maternal mortality rate decline significantly.

We like to review our outcome measures monthly to visualize any significant trends early. If we see a trend that could have adverse effects, we are in a position to change our approach before problems arise. We generally wait for a quarter before we make any drastic changes to a program so that a simple

statistical variation doesn't mislead us. This frequent outcome measure review allows us to make small changes in the program and fully understand its effect.

When we properly assess the challenges we are trying to surmount, plan and implement the solutions, and constantly monitor and evaluate our programs, we can avoid wasting resources, prevent harm to communities, and accomplish what we set out to do.

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