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## **The Long, Muddy Road: Sustainability Theory Becomes Practice for One NGO** By Elizabeth Bara

“These are people you know, not just numbers!” exclaimed Joseph Miti, a Project Manager with A Self-Help Assistance Program (ASAP Africa). We were discussing project targets and indicators at the field office in Nyanga, Zimbabwe, in April 2005. After more than 10 years on the ground in Nyanga, targets and theories about human development had become inconsequential. We had learned to follow the lead of our local staff, and to reject the numbers in favor of the people themselves. We were charting a new course in sustainability, and that road was uncertain.



I co-founded ASAP Africa in 1994 with Tom Arsenault, whom I had met and married during a stint in the United States Peace Corps in Swaziland. We headed to Zimbabwe with one-way plane tickets, bought an inexpensive vehicle, and gave ourselves a year to “figure it out”. As it turned out, however, we stayed for 11 years and built a successful organization. ASAP Africa helped build classrooms for over 11,300 students and housing for more than 200 teachers, as well as creating a scholarship for needy children in over 100 schools. But only after over a decade of working to affect positive change in rural Africa were the facts about sustainable development becoming clear. We had established ASAP to assist people in their efforts to improve their own lives, and now was the time for the sustainability test. In May 2005, we finally left Zimbabwe.

Watching the work of ASAP Africa grow and change, we were fortunate enough to have a first-hand look at development and its effective integration into a community. Our experience touches on the struggles that many NGOs face, but, ultimately, it was ASAP’s focus on giving Nyanga residents the reins that led to its success. Three major pillars helped us along as we pursued self-sustainability.

### **1. Avoid institution building by channeling benefits directly to communities**

ASAP’s early projects focused on self-reliance through community building and education. We helped communities come together to build classrooms and teacher housing in selected rural areas, providing building materials and training the school heads to oversee the projects. The community provided the sand, stone, locally molded bricks and some labor as their contribution.

During that time we also administered an orphan scholarship fund. Committees of teachers and parents prioritized children by need, to ensure that the most in-need received funds first. Each year the number of requests escalated. After seven years, we had filled some desperate needs but we had no staff and had not been successful at



implementing anything sustainable. We decided to transfer our grassroots efforts to local staff.

## 2. Develop local staff that will enhance sustainability and effectiveness of projects

The need to tackle the donor syndrome we had created became urgent as requests for scholarships continued to increase. In 2001 we restructured ASAP's program to focus on increasing household security and income. We started with the Village Savings and Loan (VSL) project. Our basic goal was simple: for families (mainly women) to be able to pay their children's school fees.

The basic concept of this self-funding internal savings and lending project consists of training self-selected groups who agree to meet regularly to save and lend money with one another. At each meeting the pooled savings is on-lent to one or more members and must be repaid at the next meeting. Loan repayments and the monthly saving contributions accumulate with each meeting until the mutually agreed upon end of the operating cycle. At this time, the accumulated amount is divided equally among the group members and they start over. Local project ownership was emphasized as the key ingredient to success.



As groups met regularly, we saw the opportunity to enhance the benefits by utilizing these meetings as a platform to provide additional skills and knowledge.

The Health and Nutrition Development Initiative (HANDEI) provided skills and knowledge about nutritional gardening, drip irrigation and growing and using nutritional herbs, as well as HIV/AIDS awareness. Community-selected leaders in each village attended training sessions and passed on skills to other villagers during savings sessions. As skills spread through ASAP's local staff and community, we were able to transition responsibility to local leadership itself.

## 3. Shift ownership and responsibility for the organization to local staff

Developing management staff with skills and the understanding to implement and report on projects, as well as to understand working with donors, was the first step to shifting ownership. This didn't start with a rule book of policies and procedures, but with each department head developing and drafting the rules and policies under which they expected their staff to operate. Once agreed upon, these policies were formally adopted.

Staff development continues every day and ASAP cherishes learning and education. We encourage and fund all staff to attend relevant courses to bring in needed skills to develop both the individual and ASAP. As we encounter new challenges, we work together to make the best decisions possible. Today ASAP staff has an understanding that they have the power to make changes in their communities; that their good ideas have merit and are worth funding. As ASAP staff have felt increasingly empowered, the rise in enthusiasm has been obvious. The staff is eager and prepared to face the new challenges that growth will bring - to see their organization grow and become more prominent locally and internationally.



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Lasting improvement will only be attained by empowering and building the capacity of local practitioners. You will not find these people at conferences in capital cities. You will find them in the schools, churches and orphanages, often in the rural areas, too busy addressing local needs to attend conferences or even to be aware of local opportunities for funding. As we learned in Zimbabwe, helping local practitioners connect with opportunities, and building a path to sustain this connection, is the most important part of development. In the end, it is only self-reliance that will end poverty.



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