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Revitalizing Rural Areas Through the Power of Social Entrepreneurship

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An Overlooked Majority?

African cities are growing rapidly, but an estimated two-thirds of African people still live in rural areas. In some African nations, the ratio of rural: urban dwellers are even higher. In Burundi, in central Africa, it's almost 9:1 - which gives some idea of the importance of the countryside.

However, numbers alone aren't always enough to ensure that politicians based in capital cities focus on their rural populations. Providing necessary infrastructure in rural areas is much harder than it is in cities, which can lead to rural people feeling that their needs are not being considered.

Many approaches have been taken to addressing this, but so far, no single proposed solution has proven to be universally successful or appropriate. This presents an opportunity (and a need) for a rethink, and in this article, I'll propose social entrepreneurship as a viable alternative.

Rural populations are more widely distributed, so it can be more costly to deliver services to them. With less access to education and healthcare, people living in rural areas tend to experience higher unemployment (or to be engaged in less rewarding work), to have more health issues and more children, and hence face an uphill struggle in terms of improving their economic circumstances. Migration to the cities is perhaps the greatest challenge of all.

As rural areas are to an extent "out of sight, out of mind", they tend to get less attention from leaders and policy makers. They may also be resented by urban dwellers if they feel that their city taxes are being used to subsidize the rural economy.

People in rural areas live closer to the edge when it comes to exposure to climate change and natural disasters such as flooding, which can destroy crops and livelihoods.

The main occupation for rural citizens is smallholder farming (out of necessity, as they need to sustain their families). However, this means that they generate relatively little



disposable income and excludes them from the mainstream economy – and makes it harder for them to obtain agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizer and farm machinery.

Lack of opportunity and limited access to education can lead to poverty cycles that can last for multiple generations.

The Importance of the Countryside

By virtue of their sheer weight of numbers, rural people should not be overlooked in democracies as they constitute an important constituency when elections come around. They are also often the guardians of a country or culture's heritage. If attention is not given to rural populations, their problems can spread to urban areas– quite literally, as people migrate in search of work. This migration usually involves the very people that the rural economy most needs – young workers. Although cities can seem to promise brighter economic prospects, many new arrivals in urban areas find that urban poverty can be just as difficult to escape.

Given how many people live in rural areas, if their economic potential is restrained, this can actually impact on the economic growth of entire regions or countries. Rural poverty can also reduce a country's appeal to outside investors who will be looking for concentrations of skilled workers.

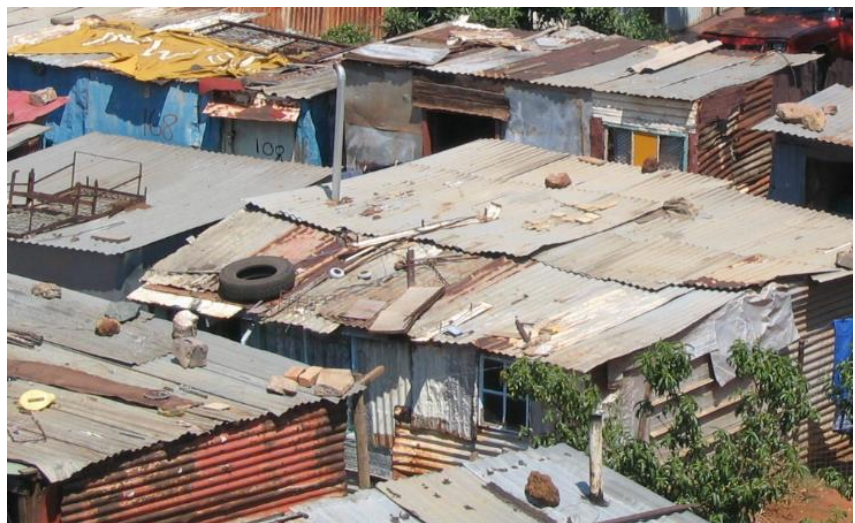
Smallholder agriculture generates little if any additional income, which means that rural people engaged in subsistence farming cannot themselves contribute to the economy as consumers.

An important first step to addressing rural poverty is persuading people not to leave. To do this, however, they have to be given incentives to stay – and that means economic opportunities.

With greater diversity of opportunities, a more balanced society can be created – which in turn creates additional potential for economic growth. Improved economic circumstances in the countryside can also make it a more pleasant place to live, with fewer disease outbreaks and less crime.

Trying to Find Answers

There is a clear need to address the causes and consequences of rural poverty, and many governments and organizations have attempted to impose solutions. That degree of imposition is in itself part of the problem – attempted solutions in the past haven't always involved listening to what rural people themselves think.



Attempted large-scale solutions that don't consider what individuals need tend to fail, or to actually exacerbate existing problems.

The incentive to solve rural poverty is clear – it can improve the lives of individuals and families and transform communities and even entire regions.

Given that many attempts at finding answers to rural poverty have not been successful, can we find a better approach – one with a greater chance of success?

Certainly, this is a question that needs investigating.

Towards a Real and Lasting Solution

My experiences as a social entrepreneurship mentor have made it clear to me that empowering people (through training and guidance) to be proactive about poverty alleviation is the best approach.

In many countries and settings, social entrepreneurship has been shown to be a sustainable way of reducing rural poverty.

Workshops and training programs can teach people the full range of skills they need to make a success of starting and running their own businesses. Involving mentors who have themselves succeeded makes the training more relatable and relevant to the learners.

Social entrepreneurship expands people's horizons – and nurtures greater ambition and self-belief. By helping people to see themselves differently, social entrepreneurship also changes how community members see each other. This can have positive impacts for women in particular.

Rural communities are often more conservative than urban areas (again, in part, because of limited communication infrastructure and exposure to new ideas). This means that many women do not get the chance to flex their own entrepreneurial muscles, as it were.

Encouraging women to be social entrepreneurs boosts their self-esteem, gives them increased economic independence and helps other people see them in a new light. Confidence of course is a key requirement for entrepreneurial success.

Encouraging social entrepreneurship is entirely aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals – especially the SDGs that relate to economic growth and women's rights.

Social entrepreneurs create additional employment opportunities and encourage other people to start companies to meet newly created demands.

More affluent rural communities, that are able to offer their members real economic opportunities and meaningful ways to improve their circumstances, can make a positive contribution to the lives of people well beyond the countryside.

Conclusions

Social entrepreneurship can reduce rural unemployment through job creation and can help lift families out of poverty. When social entrepreneurs succeed, they create a virtuous cycle of new opportunities for others. Rural economies are reinforced through upliftment, and help rural people argue more convincingly for increased government investment.

Investment means a better quality of life for rural people, including improved infrastructure which in turn makes it easier for social entrepreneurs to succeed.

When people see their fellow citizens succeeding, they're more likely to engage in this kind of economic activity themselves.

Social entrepreneurship can make rural communities more livable, which means that people are more likely to stay there. This relieves some of the pressure on city infrastructure, resulting in more cohesive, healthier and happier societies throughout the country.

I've seen how the multiplier effect of social entrepreneurship can have far-reaching, positive economic benefits when it comes to revitalizing rural communities – a goal that is certainly worth investing in.



About the Author:

Dr. Florence Nisabwe is an independent expert and consultant on sustainable development strategies, project management and good governance.

She gained her PhD in Entrepreneurship and Development Economics, but her true passion is for helping women to help themselves through social entrepreneurship projects. She loves getting involved in hands-on projects that can make a positive difference Africa has its problems, but it is also a continent where targeted local interventions can yield amazing results. Social entrepreneurship and helping women to become financially self-reliant can transform families and whole communities.

Through the Foundation, Lance d'Afrique Burundi (LAB), which she co-founder, she's helping women to acquire the skills and confidence they need to run their own businesses and take a stand against gender-based violence, exclusion and poverty. The Foundation uses education and mentorship to empower African women. She has worked hard to develop her public speaking skills so that she can attend conferences and events to share ideas on leadership and development. She looks at every situation from a social entrepreneurship perspective and always focus on solutions rather than problems.



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Kyle is the Junior Project Manager at the International Council for Small Business (ICSB) in Washington, D.C. and the Editor of the ICSB Gazette.

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Dr. Ayman El Tarabishy

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