

Philosophy and Approach

Intrinsic to the success of Excellent Development is the Philosophy and Approach it adopts in its work. The start point is a COMMUNITY and THEIR defined problems and priorities. Excellent Development neither imposes solutions nor takes a specific solution-based approach to their work. It is Excellent who adapt and re-prioritise according to what they hear – rather than the other way round.

Excellent works with registered self-help projects on the basis that they contribute significantly to their own benefits – for example they terrace land for free and contribute half of the cost of sand dams. To further understand the philosophy and approach – let's hear what the people involved with Excellent Development have to say...

The start of Excellent Development:

Simon, Excellent Development co-founder –

'Excellent Development was founded as a result of seeing the Utooni Development Project. Almost unheard of, it's been going for 28 years in Africa. That project has been driven by Joshua, was founded by Joshua, utilising the approach and the philosophy that we're now trying to utilise throughout Ukambani (the region) and hopefully further afield. So we know where Utooni has gone. They now work with very, very little help from anyone else, the people have had a lot of support from communities and from NGOs in the past, but now they stand on their own feet. They've built their own houses, they've got their own needlework classes, they pay for all of that themselves. They earn income as dividends every single year from the work that they do, and they will continue to march forward, regardless of anybody else helping them. The only thing that an NGO does, is just provide a bit of extra fuel, or a bit of a turbo-charge to help their engine move forward. So we believe that by working with communities under the same approach and philosophy that Joshua's used, that we will be able to provide that same support to enable people to take control over their own lives, and communities to work forward through all of their priorities, so that they can build themselves a better life.'

The start-up philosophy:

Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder –

'The communities come themselves - we don't go to communities and say we are able to do 1,2,3. They have heard what we are doing. Some come and say we need to be associated with what you are doing, and then our extension staff will tell them, or explain what actually the ideas we have and the policy of the NGO. If they find they are able, and we are able to support them, we do that. If they find it is difficult not to get free things then they can be on the outside side, and they leave us alone, but most of the time they have chewed it before they come to us.'

Community engagement:

Prof. Mugambi, University of Nairobi –

'The local community itself must be involved. They must themselves identify the needs that they want to meet, the problems they want to solve. What we need to do is to accompany them in solving their problems but not create

our own problems and try to go solve them on their behalf. I think that elimination, or eradication of poverty cannot be done when people create problems and solve them in other people's areas.'

Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder –

'Excellent Development in the few years it has existed, we have been able to talk to communities according to their needs. They explain to us what they want to see happen and then we are enabling them to get to where they want to go. Just giving them the knowledge that they need and enabling them to do what they think is going to help them.'

Simon, Excellent Development co-founder –

'I think one of the important things about our work – obviously we're known very much to be a sand dam, terracing and trees charity – But that's only because through our experience and talking to communities, we know that that is their priority and that is what it is that they're wanting help with. But in actual fact, what we're helping them with is water. So you find that 20% of the time, it's not always a sand dam that is the solution. You've seen some instances where there are pipelines and springs available, we instead have supported a community to build a pipeline and a tank to improve their water supplies. So even though it may appear to some people that we've got our solution in our head, that that's what people will have, that isn't the truth. Because the truth is that we are constantly altering the support that we're giving communities, to enable them to meet the priorities that they want.'

Communities working together:

Charles, farmer - *'When Excellent Development came, they started educating us about the goodness, the benefits of being together first. The benefit of working together using our hands to do the work manually, because we never used to do that. I was working in my shamba alone, so for the first instance, they taught us how to join our hands together – work as a team, the benefit of that, and they also told us why don't you join your hands together, because you Charles, if you work nicely at your shamba you cannot get assistance. We cannot come to you and say, well Charles, you have done very well, in this case we are giving you a wheelbarrow – they cannot do that. But when you are in a group, just try to do that, work together, we will come to see physically what you have done. You all get together, you have seen samples, you are following instructions, you have helped one another and then the benefit is that you can be assisted, where you cannot do yourselves. We can see your weaknesses, we can see your needs, and then we can help you together, but not as an individual.'*

Harold Miller, Excellent Supporter - *'The so called Mwethya system of community organisation and community working together is an old tradition. This is used for harvesting, for building, for whatever. So it was very easy to see this – any innovation that comes into the community immediately taps into that dynamic. So it was not a question of whether or not to do it, it was a question of how to mobilise the idea because it was already going. No good idea takes off in this community without some kind of integration with that community development dynamic.'*

Giving for free:

Simon, Excellent Development co-founder –

'One of the biggest watch words of Excellent Development is 'nothing comes for free'. If you give free things to people you take away their dignity and you don't allow people to take ownership of their own lives, so you can't work in that way. If you give people things for free then our work fails.'

Yes or no:

Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder –

'I don't say yes to anything that someone will regret later. If we cannot fit in what they think I say no. I know if hurts but that's the truth, you've got to tell people no, so that they can reason with their own thinking – what next...Sometimes they think it is arrogant the way you are handling their request, or they don't think we are serious. But to some extent you see them enjoying the benefits of being told no, and this is how you should do it, if you need to get there.'

How the development works:

Harold Miller, Excellent Supporter - *'The basic philosophy of Excellent Development is to support what is going on, to acknowledge what is now happening, to fit in to the current dynamics, to be a part of what is happening. I hope to be as invisible as possible and let the community take it where it wants to go.'*

Women's Empowerment:

80% of the members of the projects are women. They do get 80% of the benefit but they are the prime drivers of what should be a community responsibility. However, Excellent doesn't work with women alone – they encourage men to get involved to strengthen the community and help them move forward faster. Women become empowered by working together and achieving improvements – with or without men.

Louisa – Chair of Kisaani self help group - *'...Yes, women carry the hardest burden, they started without men, and men only came this time, so they have been carrying it on the own without men. Most of the men spend their time drinking beer, enjoying beer, and didn't have a vision of tomorrow like women do. We have talked to the men and encouraged them to join us and we have more than 10 men working in the group now!'*

Rhoda, farmer - *'When we started this project some years ago, women could not talk inform of men, but now we could talk. I could not say no to my husband, but now I do.'*

Esther, Chair of Utooni self help group - *'I am proud to be a woman, and these days I can say I'm free, and my husband makes me free. So for example, if Joshua tells us there is a workshop in Nairobi and when I come to tell my husband, he is the one who assists me to pack and go. So I'm proud of that.'*

Community exchanges:

Simon, Excellent Development co-founder –

'I think one of the strengths of Excellent Development's work is the fact that we don't work with communities in

isolation from each other. Because we're a charity that works on the basis of listening to the people and acting upon that, actually the people themselves are the biggest power and the biggest enabler of development. So to enable people to move forward we bring the people together. So one community will go and visit another, representatives of communities will all come together in a meeting, and what they do is to discuss their problems, they see one community is a little further ahead than the other and that gives the motivation. Someone has ideas of particular solutions, they see a particular idea or solution working, like inter-cropping, like Napier grass, like the planting of trees. They see that working and they get encouraged by their own people telling them and explaining to them what they've done and how they've moved forward. So the power isn't coming from outside and giving people solutions, the power is absolutely in helping people to help each other.'

Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder –

'The way we see a workshop works well and that is where I say I have seen success, because the interaction of different communities and discussing their areas and also seeing what others have done, it has more power than sitting with a few leaders and giving them the knowledge, which stays in them, rather than going to the people.'

Sustainability and Future:

One key challenge for Excellent's work is helping groups to become sustainable by reducing youth migration. They need to learn that people can still have a successful life even in the rural areas.

Esther, Chair of Utooni self help group - *'My project is old – it is 28. As now, some of the members are very old and we tried to tell them to bring next of kins because they can't work, the heavy work, we work.'*

Excellent is encouraging football and netball teams for the young people connected to the projects. In exchange for shirts they help their parents to build dams and terracing. They also visit other projects to play and work.

Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder –

'Yeah, definitely we are training alot of, another team behind me. And as you went out, you have seen we have field managers, we have extension people. I am spending my time to try and let them more understand what it means to listen to the people and act according to their needs, rather than act from what experts call the needs of the people. And for sure, I have only 2 years, and I am 60, and I will be thinking I should be stepping down for somebody else, and sit and maybe walk with them and see what they are doing, just to see the continuity of that. Would love to see people take over from us.'

Andrew, field manager - *'Already we have started helping him because he's getting old and we have to support him. We need to see the community grow up with development. Already we have been helping him in learning the project, so that we can understand what should be done. So we hope when he retires we can take care of the project.'*

Excellent's development is a different kind of development. Its success is based on people working together and sharing knowledge. Give the power back to the people and allow them to take control of their own destiny.