Chapter Two

Methods

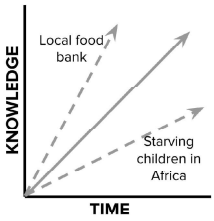
Take a method and try it. If it fails, admit it frankly, and try another. But by all means, try something.

Franklin D. Roosevelt

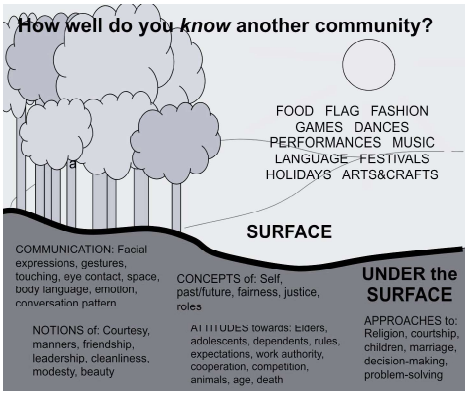
A common method of compassion for the impoverished is the *needs assessment*. Helping those in need starts with understanding their needs. Understanding requires knowledge, which is gained through education, experience, and listening to experts. When we have knowledge, we can reason out our approach instead of relying only on emotional reactions when assisting others.

Supporting a cause based on a passionate response may sometimes be effective, but it's essential to also support our emotions with knowledge gained through more than just a brief encounter. Wrapping our heads around the culture and politics in a remote village in the middle of Africa takes time and effort. Even understanding the culture and politics in our local homeless community would be incomplete if our experience was limited to just one evening volunteering handing out soup and sandwiches.

Sometimes we hit it right. Having a background understanding helps. For example, I am well-informed about our local food bank. I know people who work there, read articles about it, and am familiar with the politics and culture surrounding it. While I may not fully know the food bank's inner workings, the learning curve isn't steep. An emotion-inspired, knee-jerk reaction inspiring me to support my local food bank will likely be reasonably close to a thought-out response.



However, when it comes to understanding the challenges faced by malnourished children in a remote African village, we are in a whole different ball game. Most of us don't know the lay of the land, the local culture, or the political scene—let alone the local language. An impulsive response will not cut it. A compassionate method that grasps the complexities of impoverished situations calls for a serious effort on our part.[1]



It's so much easier to suggest solutions when you don't know too much about the problem.[2]

Needs Analysis

The most common problem-solving method for gaining knowledge is a *needs analysis*. Embarking on a needs analysis begins with a passionate team of experienced individuals who become dedicated to a project through their connections to a non-governmental organization (NGO), church, or community leader in the field. Together, they brainstorm an approach, outline pertinent questions, and gather essential information to create effective problem-solving solutions.

The journey begins with a visit to the community and establishing genuine connections. Initial contact often occurs at the highest level of existing community hierarchies, such as the community council, church leadership, or government office. While it usually starts in an office, the endeavour should swiftly transition to a more vibrant environment, such as under a tree, in a community center, or even a church.

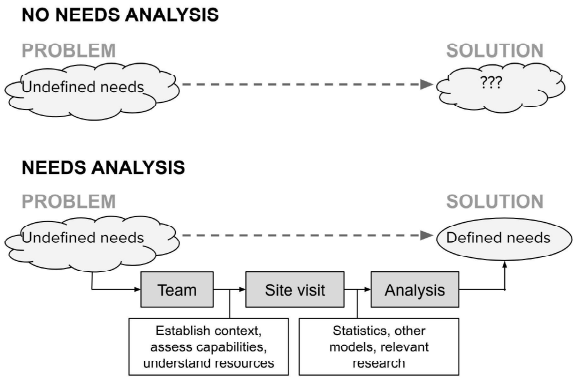
Having established connections, the team dives into asking thought-provoking questions to understand the context. It starts with the fundamental question: "What isn't working for you?" Next, in order to discover the community's capabilities and resources, the team asks, "What do you want to do instead?" or "What is preventing you from doing what you desire?"

The team then shifts from asking questions under a village tree to conducting in-depth interviews with specific individuals, such as leaders, teachers, nurses, and other influential figures. Although the questions remain the same, the conversations become more enriching.

The last activity on the field is a community tour to observe day-to-day

activities. The team immerses itself in various community locations, such as stores, gardens, and social services, to capture the full essence of community life. A community visit for a needs analysis should span at least a few days. A week-long stay is even better, allowing for meaningful informal conversations amd a thorough observation of community life.

After gathering what they believe to be relevant knowledge, the team regroups to debrief its findings and compare its experiences with other community models. The team members' invaluable experiences take the lead, contributing to a richer and more comprehensive analysis.



Finally, it's time for analysis. The team dives into the data and incorporates additional resources like statistics, infrastructure details, and economic factors. The aim is to create a comprehensive, prioritized list of needs that will serve as the foundation to derive solutions. While these solutions won't be a cure-all, they will address real problems observed in the field, with the most pressing issues rising to the top.

The needs analysis is a problem-solving approach that we in the global north are at home with. To a certain extent, it's a part of our culture. We have an intuitive linear response to a perceived need. However, our cultural response has limitations.

The primary limitation is the assumption that a needs deficit exists and must be filled. This assumption mistakenly presumes that the more precisely a needs deficit is defined, the more effective the solution will be. We have a

commonly used problem-solving quote for this assumption: "Given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes understanding the problem and one minute resolving it."[3]

After 59 minutes of investigating and determining that lack of healthcare is a community deficit, it would take less than a minute to come up with what seems like a straightforward solution—build a medical clinic. If we determine the deficit is in education, then building a school would be the quick answer. Yet, if we were to review even a small bit of the history of community development, we would find that filling a well-defined deficit has not produced community-transforming results.

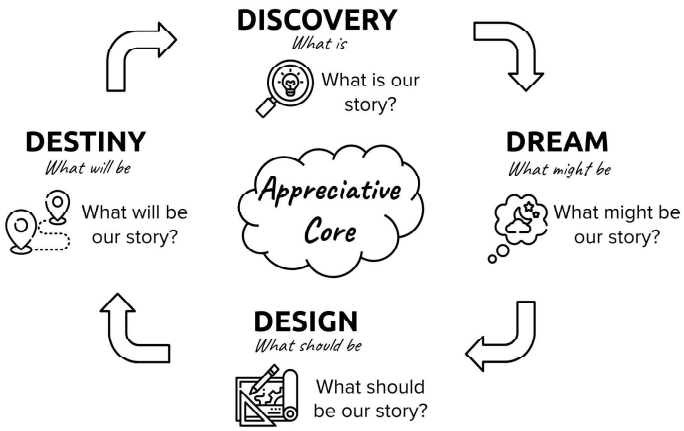
The dilemma is the negative point of departure—focusing on people's problems. Undoubtedly, the impoverished have problems, but with this as a starting point, the focus is on their perceived inabilities. It reinforces a self-identity already marred by their poverty. Any well-meaning method that comes from a thoroughly analysed and well-defined deficit aimed at, let's say, reducing hunger or improving sanitation, will fail as long as a poor person's identity remains marred.

Problem-solving methods, like a needs assessment, have their uses. When showing compassion for the impoverished, a helpful approach might be counterintuitive: ignore the need. That, and a healthy dose of humbly admitting we don't have a solution. These are the methods we will turn to now.

Appreciative Inquiry

The corporations we love to loathe have developed helpful knowledge-acquiring methods that we can utilize. One of these methods is called the Appreciative Inquiry (AP). Unlike the problem-solving method, AP focuses on what is already working.

> [AP] deliberately seeks to discover people's exceptionality—their unique gifts, strengths, and qualities. It actively searches and recognizes people for their specialties—their essential contributions and achievements. And it is based on principles of equality of voice—everyone is asked to speak about their vision of the true, the good, and the possible. ... Its goal is to discover in all human beings the exceptional and the essential.[4]



AP is best explained using a 4-D framework: discovery, dream, design and destiny.

The first stage, called *discovery*, is based on the premise that everyone and every community has a hidden positive story. Discovering this story provides an anchor for positive social change. Find what gives life to a community when it is most alive.

An appreciative inquiry overlooks the numerous health and economic issues facing an impoverished village and instead asks what excites them, what's going well, and what makes them proud. Is it their children, the heartwarming conversations around the table, the village traditions, the clothing, the