

Sustainability Leaders in Action

Identifying Emerging Leaders in the Field: Innovative Problem-Solving At Mercy Corps

By Paul Wright

Leadership comes in all shapes and sizes. It can also appear in unexpected places. Most of us are used to working in organizations and in situations in which the leaders are clearly designated, recognized figures. So, at least, goes the conventional thinking. Yet repeatedly constructive results on the ground can best be explained by emergent leaders for whom conventional thinking defies all the rules. As it pursues its critical global mission, Portland, OR-based Mercy Corps has learned the importance of looking for just such people wherever it goes.

With a commitment to helping neighborhoods around the world develop durable solutions to a wide range of social and environmental problems, Mercy Corps has acquired a solid reputation as a highly innovative not-for-profit organization with a presence in some 40 countries. For over 30 years, it has expanded the definition of “do-able” by tapping into a seemingly bottomless well of creativity---both local and what it brings to the table---that seeks to tackle challenges by looking beyond symptoms to attack root causes. An essential ingredient in Mercy Corps's approach to projects lies in its recognition that those who experience a problem must be key partners in solving it. As a corollary of that approach, its staff understands that the potential for leadership exists virtually everywhere: it must be sensed, welcomed and nurtured. To learn more, we spoke with Craig Redmond, Senior Vice President for Mercy Corps.

Redmond, just returned from Niger, begins our conversation by stating the importance of “assuming that you will find great people to work with.” It is a matter of taking the time to look, listen and observe. “There is always something to build from, provided certain things

happen, such as the establishment of stability that allows strength and talent to come forward.”



John Romano for Mercy Corps

For example, he points out, with respect to Niger, the critical need for a sense of gender equity to emerge, so that “respect for one another's voices” can help to anchor support for progress across a community. A simple but often underestimated path in that direction can unfold when women “see their plans and ideas taken seriously and given a visible, three-dimensional hearing.”

A recent project in Niger has focused on ways to store fodder, in order to conserve its nutritional value. Meeting with members of a pastoralist community there, Redmond asked what they had learned as a result of the project and the solution that emerged from it, making sure to include the women present.

One woman, he reports, offered a clear, precise and detailed explanation of both the problem and its solution, “showing a moment of leadership.” Although she later broke away from the group to apologize for being so straightforward (a reflection, says Redmond, of conflicting cultural practices), that she spoke with such clarity helped form an immediate impression, raising the question of what practices might reinforce the example of leading in the moment. It also instilled the notion that capacity-building must be a prime component of leadership. “We try to create spaces for people to discover their voices.”



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At the same time, says Redmond, a key aspect of leadership and problem-solving lies in learning to appreciate the complexity and scale of the issues presented. In the Horn of Africa, for example, communities confront a powerful confluence of an environment pushed past its carrying capacity, disillusioned youth, social conflict, under-education, and chronically high unemployment. The need to distinguish between short-term feasibility and long-term possibility plays a critical role in determining whether a proposed solution can take root, or simply address a current urgent need. So does expanding the potential universe of “problem-solving” stakeholders. For example, in Somalia, says Redmond, it is important to grasp the interplay between the Somalian diaspora and the country they left behind. “The diaspora remains a vital part of Somalia’s rich culture that watches for ways to influence and participate in solutions there. It makes sense to engage” their potential creativity.



John Romano for Mercy Corps

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Cate Guillon for Mercy Corps

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To learn more about Mercy Corps go to <http://www.mercycorps.org/>

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