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NATIONOFCHANGE / OP-ED ANALYSIS

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Can Five Simple Principles Make a World of Difference?

"The overarching aim is simple; to assist the design of efforts to make living in a particular place better for those who are actually there."

One of the most exciting products of a ten year study, commended for its originality and innovation, is a set of five practical principles, to enhance community development and project management. These principles might make development practitioners' work clearer. The application of the principles in a series of diverse case studies reveals wider reaching implications for future research and practice.

One of these is the generation of 'inhabit-*ability*', a state of being which allows a particular place to be better inhabited, following an intervention. By intervention, we mean the act that modify (or hinder) a place, event or set of social circumstances. The concepts offer the potential to move beyond the cynicism and sense of dilution evoked by the word 'sustainable'.

The overarching aim is simple; to assist the design of efforts to make living in a particular place better for those who are actually there. How can we deeply consider the impact on human and non-human stakeholders, and acknowledge the voices in the community of people and species affected, especially those at the margins?

The principles are a set of five short statements. Grounded in an extensive theoretical analysis, the principles have been analyzed in four differing contexts; community health, Australian Indigenous community development, food security social enterprise and a transitional economic planning project.

The principles are relevant for many people working in the development fields. Project managers, Indigenous Elders, social entrepreneurs, local politicians, public servants, social workers, teachers, doctors, community activists, and other cultural leaders, have all engaged with the principles at various levels and stages of their projects.

Simple and elegant, the principles are:

• *Adopt a gender sensitive approach.*

• *Value voices from the margins.*

• *Incorporate the environment within research/actions.*

• *Select appropriate method/ologies.*

• *Undertake research/action that promotes plural, desirable and sustainable social*

changes.

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There are three primary ways the principles can be applied in practice. These are during the design and implementation phase, monitoring and evaluation opportunities, and in critique of socio-economic and cultural policy.

(1) Design and implementation

The principles can help practitioners find 'gaps' in their thinking in the design of an intervention that addresses a multiplicity of often overlapping, social and environmental concerns.

(2) Evaluation and monitoring

The principles are evaluative criteria. They provide a focus for critical reflection and embody ethical and moral issues that will help clarify the fundamental values in the design and implementation of a program or project. Practitioners define boundaries to consider what has been made explicit and implicit. In either the project planning and design phase, during implementation, monitoring and evaluation, and during the projects progress (rather than a post-project point-in time activity) the principles can be used to reflect upon the quality, and achievable objectives, of the intervention.

Thinking about any or your projects' strengths and weaknesses through these principles, highlights the different levels of relevance and influence some principles have over others. The principles are not all inclusive.

(3) Critique of Socio-Political and Cultural Policy

The principles can contribute positively to movements for social change. They politicize and give agency to nature, to inform awareness of the interrelated power relations that extend between humans and the environment. Rethinking of the notion of 'sustainable development' is within the principles' remit for tangible, long-term environmental gains.

Applying the principles led to questions about the implementation and monitoring of the Australian 'Close the Gap' policy to redress Australian Indigenous disadvantage.

Applying the principles challenges practitioners to adopt a complementary or alternative methodological starting point that grounds projects within a community, as an alternative to the 'top down' approach. There are vast potential benefits and gains to be had through community involvement, distribution of leadership and empowerment.

Their usage also requires interventionists to recognize their own subjective sociocultural reality, gender orientations and belief systems, and the part these have to play.

What are the implications for practice?

The design principles provide a framework for practice, rather than a theory. The most important implication of the framework is the practical, ethical challenge issued to all interventionists, to confront and move beyond harmful dualist structures that devalue sets of people, animals or nature, against one another, the former being made more prominent and powerful. Some examples are the human/nature, white/black, and man/woman dualisms.

Why do boundaries matter?

Boundary analysis has an important bearing on how the principles are used in practice. Knowledge can be understood as something that is contained within a boundary. We can focus on the knowledge, or content, of what is within a boundary, or we can shift our gaze to analyze the placement of the boundary. The boundary, itself, draws our critical attention, and becomes crucial to the development of knowledge and then the development of a project.

A common complexity in any social project is dealing with competing stakeholder viewpoints. Boundary analysis can enable all manner of competing world views into a project, including those that are counter to the values of the primary stakeholders and/or interventionist. The great value of boundary analysis is that the process generates explicit, new knowledge and opportunities for powerful and empowering learning to take place. It requires a commitment to distributing power, as it is not being retained or withheld by the project manager, or person in an authority position.

Why select more than one method?

There can be great value in methodological pluralism because practitioners need to address complexity and uncertainty, multiple values and the political effects of their work. These issues are the defining themes of socio-ecological development and a creative mix of methods is likely to be more effective than a single approach. The principles can influence both qualitative methodologies and quantitative methods.

How do the principles enhance interventionists' awareness of issues of gender and marginality?

Our experience has shown that individuals pursue discussions about the principles, prompted by the sharing of the relevance and applicability of each principle to their project. The layperson and academic alike can meet the concepts of gender and social inclusion, embedded within the first two principles, from their current knowledge of human rights, personal experience and emotional response. The principles do not insist on a particular dogmatic approach or social agenda.

How can the environment or nature be given a 'voice'?

In the foreseeable future, large-scale destruction of part-of, or whole ecosystems, we expect will become a crime. A submission to make 'ecocide' the 5th crime against peace is currently with the United Nations. International laws that adversely affect all the inhabitants of a place, not just humans, will shift protection away from private, profit driven interests, to the public interest and a wider community i.e. ecosystems and species, than current laws have had the ability to achieve. The prevailing law of ecocide will center the inhabitants of a place, as a central determinant of interventions. It is the most effective proposal we have seen as a means to hear the voice and interests of so many who are presently given partial consideration at best, and completely ignored at worst (see Polly Higgins, Eradicating Ecocide, 2010). The question then arises what will we do, and how will we do it, when the old ways are illegal, as well as unsustainable. These principles are a potential guide for us to move on.

A final word

The principles stimulate a raft of further research questions. How can the framework be strengthened and embellished? What is the scale of projects they can be applied to? How do they apply across social sectors, as yet untested, i.e. education, local governance, building and construction and law?

The future of the design principles for generating inhabitability is in developing interventionists' skills to translate the principles across professions and projects, and to look to the framework as a guide to planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Practitioners, project managers, bureaucrats, policy makers, researchers, Indigenous leaders and activists can consider their interventions in light of these five simple principles. What is missing from your project? In the absence of a principles' representation, is that omission justified? Can a project be strengthened by considering the inclusion of the ideas generated by one or more of the principles? Should we consider the cost now, or be prepared to pay later? Are we leaving a situation in a better condition than when we arrived? Are our actions generating greater inhabitability?

The design principles provide strong foci for reflective practice and for thinking about social justice ethics. Establishing the presence of these principles may have beneficial outcomes for all species on our planet – not just the richer people. Our point in time demands that we do things differently. Design principles towards generating greater habitability of place can assist interventionists to make the transition towards valuable new research and action paradigms.

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