

ABSTRACT

In this essay I seek to outline a simple, efficacious method which can be adopted by my peers and others my age to find practical solutions to community problems. The reason that governments and non governmental organizations are unable to ameliorate the situation of the world's poor and uneducated is that most remedies imposed are formulated keeping in mind a specific experiential context and then applied as a universal panacea. This results in good intentions and resources being lost in misunderstanding when applied to different situations. However community solutions can be tailor-made to deal with the special needs of a specific group of people.

The young must be involved in this problem solving process for once the youth have been instructed of the repercussions of a social action they can ensure that awareness spreads amongst families and other children. This is essential to prevent the perpetuation of a problem to future generations.

For the youth to effectively address an issue all they need to do is first, communicate and create awareness. Secondly, following a lifestyle which embodies a cause not only makes a difference but sets an example for other to emulate. Thirdly, more active participation can manifest itself through institutions like the school, charities etc. Internships, volunteering and applying what you have learnt towards your cause are all ways of solving a community issue while living your life.

Just remember your gestures may not be large enough to stop the wave but you could be part of the move that turns the tide.

1. Introduction

We live in a world plagued by many problems. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, and disease are just a few of the issues policy makers need to address. Yet, it is quite apparent that the efforts put in by international and national authorities have only met with limited success. In this paper I will be specifically talking about the problem of illiteracy and the problems of the uneducated. Why is it that governments and non governmental organizations are unable to ameliorate the situation of the world's poor and uneducated? The reason is that most of remedies imposed are formulated keeping in mind a certain middle class, educated experiential context and then applied as a universal panacea. This results in good intentions and resources being lost in misunderstanding.

For example many would say that providing schools is the best way to deal with the problem of illiteracy. However why children remain uneducated is a complex concern with many different facets which require attention. Simply providing infrastructure will not enable every section of society to access education. Setting up a school in rural India will not raise literacy levels unless accompanied by an awareness programme that teaches parents about the dangers of child labour and the need for young girls to do more than provide household services. Without reassuring parents that a school will prepare their children better for the future than their ancestral vocations it would be foolishness to expect community participation in any education schemes. Similarly concerns like unemployment, poverty, and HIV need to be tackled on a more personalized scale that take into account the unique idiosyncrasies that may prevent an individual from effectively utilizing the facilities that are provided for their benefit. For a successful

solution to these widespread problems efforts must be made to ensure that good intentions are not lost in translation.

As it is practically impossible for any central authority to frame policies which understand and address the distinctive manifestations of a problem in different contexts, communities and regions, the most efficacious manner of handling different quandaries would be to handle them on a community level. This way solutions can be tailor-made to deal with the special needs of a specific group of people.

This brings us to who in the community should take the responsibility of social change. The advantage of having young people and their peers involved in solving societal dilemmas is that it will result in the creation of a generation of more responsible and aware citizens. The young have the ability to reach and impact the lives of others who are the same age and in the same situation with more success and empathy than adults. Similarly they affect families directly taking their message to the grassroots and into the household. Also spreading awareness amongst the young will ensure the control and inevitable stop to the problem. Show one generation the value of education and you ensure that they will show future generations.

Their active participation can also set an example that leads others to follow their model. To illustrate I can quote the example of a fourteen year old girl from Andhra Pradesh, India who had been married to a much older man against her will. After a local organization rescued her from her abusive domestic situation she proceeded to get herself educated and went back to her village to ensure that the practice of marrying teenage village girls to men in the city stopped. As a result her sisters and neighbours were the first girls to attend the village school and get educated.

Empowering the youth is akin to an empowered brighter future.

2. How can the youth help?

It is my belief that we must begin to take responsibility for the condition of the world around us and do what we can to make a difference. With the amount of information available to us today it is only fair that we give back to where we come from. Tools like the internet and televisions ensure that we are regularly updated of the events that occur around us. However this information does more than just report facts it creates a duty that we utilize this knowledge for the benefit of those who cannot access resources easily.

To help more people access more resources to benefit themselves and their families their capacity and position to reach reserves of resources must be increased. This can only be done by empowering them through education. This will allow them to find jobs, raise their economic status and create a defence of countervailing power which reduces exploitation through discrimination. The most effective method of uplifting people is allowing them to uplift themselves. For the youth to set this cycle in motion they could follow the three steps I have listed out below.

2.1. Recognize there is a problem and create awareness.

This is the first step to solving any problem is recognizing what it is. This entails more than just a superficial acknowledgement – there needs to be an understanding of what exactly is going wrong, why and how it can be remedied. It is essential that we keep an open mind about the nature of the issue. The reason I stress on understanding the issue completely is that it is

easy to get carried away and start blaming different factors for the creation of a problem. A father's refusal to send his daughter to school could be misunderstood if the context of the lack of safety provisions for travelling to the school and back are not factored into the equation. Here a lapse in law and order would be the cause of low literacy rates amongst women and not just a lapse on the parents' part.

Comprehension should be followed by a conscious effort to discuss the problem in our immediate surrounding of friends and family. It may seem an insipid effort but by making a little effort to introduce topics like conflict and discrimination into your conversation you can raise awareness and learn new perspectives. Different opinions may just help you see familiar faces in a different light.

A simple, unceremonious effort at communicating that there is a problem that needs to be addressed can have wide reaching consequences. For example in the situation of growing use of narcotics and other psychotropic substances simply conversing about the side effects of these drugs will help spread awareness. Mentioning that frequent use and overdose can result in permanent brain damage may be the words of caution that stop a young person from succumbing to peer pressure.

These conversations with those close to you may impact your immediate surroundings but if you want to reach out further you can do more research on what is concerning you and put up your feelings in the form of an article for your school magazine, newspaper or any local publication. If you're more comfortable with something less structured you can write what you choose on your own terms and post it either on your blog or on other sites and online communities.

Mentioning the problem at home may be helpful to any siblings you have and it has the added advantage of allowing your parents to contribute their own experiences. In all probability their practical knowledge about issues like accessing healthcare, drugs, alcohol and education to name will add to your own experiences

2.2. Set an example

The reason why most teenagers don't end up contributing more to society is that they are eternally dogged by the feeling that they can't make a difference. They think of themselves as too insignificant to really change or solve any problem in a community populated by so many others who are older, more educated, more qualified and more experienced. However, in a closely bound society like ours no action occurs in a vacuum. Each word spoken, each movement and attempt is like a drop falling into a pool. The drop of water may disappear but it will leave ripples that reach far beyond it could imagine.

Similarly a young person championing a cause may not have any material results to show to the world, but don't underestimate the impact of your actions. Say one person uses paper bags to conserve the environment and his friends catch on and later his mother starts to follow and soon his teacher in school notices and does the same. He might not have saved a rainforest but his own insignificant paper bag marks the beginning of a movement big enough to make a difference.

Symbolism is often not given enough credit any more. A symbolic gesture of concern, of sacrifice and of understanding can make a world of difference. You don't have to force your opinions on anyone else – you're

not trying to convert anyone to your side or make them change their mind about what they feel. However in a quiet, non intrusive way you will be helping many acknowledge your opinion and form their own.

In this manner if you and a group of friends may decide not to consume alcohol or narcotics at events where they are freely available. You make the choice more socially acceptable and thus easier for reluctant first timers to say no. Or you may decline participating in other unhealthy social practices like employing child labour or paying less than minimum wage to those you know are desperate enough to take a job at unfair wage rates. You could even privately boycott any brands which use sweatshops and employ people in unhealthy working conditions. It's your cause and you can choose how your disapproval manifests. Keep in mind that the best way to champion a cause is to live it. Your gestures may not be large enough to stop the wave but you could be part of the move that turns the tide.

2.3. Actively campaign for the issue.

If you're not satisfied and want to participate more actively you will preferably need to route your efforts through an established institution. These can be of two types. The first is an educational institution. Collaborate with teachers and school administration to come up with formal presentations for spreading awareness. Your teachers may be able to help in other ways and be able to tell you about other channels through which you can make a difference. Making announcements, putting up posters and handing out relevant reading material to those who go to school with you is an easy way to spread the message. Also from amongst these diverse

numbers of students there will arise others with similar passions, or encouraging experiences which may give your efforts direction and focus.

You could also work to include spreading awareness as a small part of the curriculum. For example if you're worrying about the environment you could ask teachers to include proper waste disposal as a topic of discussion for children who are 10 years old and above. Slightly older children can be taught to recycle and conserve while teenagers can be told about the technicalities of alternative power sources and the advantages and disadvantages of each. The lesson won't take more than an hour but it'll raise a group of students who understand the consequences of using aerosol cans. Perhaps if this had been explained to the previous generation the hole in the ozone layer would not be irreparable today.

Community problems can also be turned into school projects. Belong to a medical college? You could host a health camp that will provide vaccinations for children whose parents can't afford them. Go to law school? Apply what you've learnt in your classes to provide free legal aid to a charity trying to enforce minimum wage laws in third world nations. Whatever you're learning can be applied to help someone who may not be able to help themselves. Even a fashion designer or a student of music can use of their creations to raise funds for a cause. If you can gather even a small group of people to help you then you might just change someone's world.

Other institutions that you can route your efforts through include charities, non governmental organizations, international institutions etc which deal with the field you are interested in. You could simply volunteer with a local organization which will help you see the more practical face of the problems you deal with. Volunteering with a legal aid clinic may help

you see the practical aspects of court life that law school may not teach you. You could even intern with an organization and put it on your resume.

3. Conclusion

So we see that for young people like my peers and I to get involved in community problems is an effective alternative solution to creating legislations and treaties which become impossible to implement.

With specific regard to education diverse remedies must be adopted to tackle the problem. Each school should be encouraged to create a fund the money from which goes to subsidizing the education of children from economically disadvantaged families. Awareness programs must be launched where children from similar social backgrounds are given the opportunity to interact with parents hesitant to send their children to school. Emphasis must be laid on how many obstacles like oppression and unemployment can be effectively eradicated with education and the resultant upward social mobility. For the young to study, succeed and set an example will be the most convincing argument in fight for sending more children to school.

To conclude I would like to state that no overt actions and sacrifice are necessary for social change. A simple sincere effort will make all the difference.