

Perspectives on stakeholder engagement & collaboration in the field:

A practice brief by Avery Baker



Background I:

The purpose of this Practice Brief is to examine the theme of collaboration with stakeholders across contexts from 2015 to today, as reflected in my own work abroad.

Collaboration is a common buzzword that gets thrown around in international work, but here I aim to point out how working with local knowledge is the most important step in all development work; from government all the way down to grassroots initiatives. Collaboration is perhaps the single most important, demanding and time-consuming process for projects in the field, but it cannot be overlooked. Without collaboration we lose the whole point of development as a field: those we seek to work with and offer aid! It is my belief that collaboration lies at the heart of every successful venture in development work. I can think of myriad examples in which I would have been out of luck without the engagement and support of a local entity in some form; whether a friend, a co-worker or an NGO! It began in 2014 when I applied and was accepted to the Peace Corps in the beautiful Republic of Vanuatu.



Ni-Vanuatu people enjoying a local delicacy



Avery getting to know villagers in Chunder, Nepal



Ni-Vanuatu women performing a traditional dance

Background II:

Development wasn't even in my subconscious then, but I would go on to do work in community development, health, sanitation, water and agriculture through various UN affiliates and NGOs over the next 27 months and down to present day. I consider this introduction to the developing world to be a pivotal time in my life and a change in trajectory. My eyes were opened to poverty, struggle and the concept of projects providing aid to the developing world; these experiences have largely defined my subsequent work in Asia and studies in Arizona. I am indebted to the tribes of Ambae island for their overwhelming generosity in taking the time to teach me about life; this is all for them.

Vanuatu 2015-2017:

Overlooking the Pacific ocean off Ambae, Vanuatu
Over the course of two years I was able to work with the Ni-Vanuatu people on the

following development projects. These anecdotes serve to point out that in no way could I have done this alone! Aid organizations would do well to bear this in mind when planning a project or training staff. I can't recommend deference to a local partner more strongly. **See below:**

1. My team and I revitalized a defunct administrative team of 10 community members to offer improvements in the village and healthcare services. This team then removed the previous leadership of the health facility via negotiations and mediation; they were found to be embezzling. I was then able to (with the team!) co-write six health and wellness awareness presentations on subjects including nutrition, NCDs, safe sex & contraceptives, family planning, family life and handwashing & hygiene that were presented more than a dozen times over two years in North Ambae to over 300 people.
2. We also facilitated seven mobile health clinics around Ambae Island with a group of missionaries, health care providers, dentists, doctors & nurses to care for more than 800 people in rural and urban communities over the course of 10 days. I arranged several of these clinics and acted as a translator for the group.

3. Our project committee designed a plan for an extension to the existing facility, which included a new maternity ward, a full solar kit with lights and battery, two new 1100 liter water tanks, a bathroom with septic tank and toilet, and finally a shower run from a local spring source. The new facilities provide clean water, power and improved healthcare for up to 600 people in the greater area.

Other collaborative projects in Vanuatu:

- **Small Projects Assistance grant through USAID:** After winning the trust of the community, I was responsible for managing the distribution, monitoring and reporting for a \$10,000 project. We completed the process **working as a committee**, taking care to utilize community aided research and a foreman appointed construction crew consisting of eight laborers.
- **UNDP Water research project:** I spent three days with a UNDP representative and Department of Water engineer, in the jungle, testing and GPS-mapping three potential water sources for three corresponding villages. My data and photographs were used in a semi-annual report later that year. I brought in **local experts** and acted as a field representative to aid them. They invited me, but

otherwise I would never have had the opportunity; a key point in all collaboration! Without these invitations to work together, collaborations are never begun. This experience taught me to seek out local expertise, ask for help and hear every side of a story when approaching a project. Working alone won't ever work as well, as many know!



Avery and his friend Hari Dhakal in 2017

Nepal 2017 & 2019:

My initial visit in Nepal in 2017 created contacts and context that proved invaluable during my Master's field practicum in summer 2019. This brought matters full circle, as it was my travels in Asia that fueled my desire to pursue development work and a Master's program in the first place. My work in 2019 primarily focused on an improved vegetable seed distribution project sponsored by GreaterGood.org,

which often called to mind my time in Vanuatu working with farmers. My responsibilities were diverse: gathering qualitative data in remote locations around Nepal; using this data to produce digital stories, blogs and photo journalism; conducting evaluations; grant-writing, to name a few. The overall goal of the project is to assist development initiatives in sustainable organic agriculture, capacity building and climate change adaptation for food security. The midline evaluation report and data have since been released under the guidance of my NGO and donors.

Observations:

All of this work abroad has hinged on the cooperation and reciprocal respect of the local populations. Without their input, most of the projects would have fallen by the wayside. There were numerous times I would arrive at sites that were vastly unequipped and unprepared to host me or do field work, but some quick thinking on the part of my local collaborators (along with much needed translation) almost always made the difference. I have their contributions to thank for the work outlined in the above sections. Stakeholder collaboration; this element has become a key component of my approach to project management and development initiatives. Without question, the collaborative projects in Nepal and Vanuatu have been far more

successful than the opportunities that have been pursued independently; whether by myself or a local population pursuing aid alone. **Don't go it alone; why even try it?**

Implications & recommendations:

I recommend that each agency approach a project with an intention to call on local expertise and traditional methods in every possible step of a project framework. Development should be collaborative by nature, and this is essential in gaining the trust of a population (or doing any beneficial work!). Without a good-faith discourse towards all developing-world actors, development agencies and their practitioners may simply throw unnecessary solutions at problems with obvious answers. I believe this should be done via more interdisciplinary work and cross-sectoral approaches in the field. Collaborative development is in many ways a familiar talking point for grassroots organizations and bigger NGOs. Yet, we fail to recognize the immediate need for more of these projects across the globe.

About the author:

Avery J. Baker is a graduate student at the University of Arizona (Class of 2020). He completed his field practicum in Nepal during summer 2019. Prior to his studies, he lived and worked across the United States and served in The Republic of Vanuatu as a Peace Corps Volunteer from 2015-2017.