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## Afterword Reflections on How Youth Can Change the World

### INTRODUCTION

Is there a collective meaning to the stories in this book? On the surface, the lives of these young people do not appear to be interconnected. They tell the stories of unique people in twenty countries addressing issues that are geographically and culturally diverse. One is trying to save a river in India, another to economically empower poverty-stricken men and women in Argentina, and yet another to teach music to children in Palestinian refugee camps. As Albania's Erion wisely warns, there are no franchise models in this work. The projects are "born" to specific people, places, and times.

Despite all this variation, six dimensions of leadership reoccur across the stories. They are the personal, visionary, knowledge, political, organizational, and societal. These dimensions provide not a recipe for youth-driven social change, but the naming of its main ingredients. The genius of these young people, as shown in the following discussion, is to mix and remix those ingredients to fit specific problems, people, places, and times in their particular country's history.



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### PERSONAL LEADERSHIP Be the Change

The first dimension of leadership is personal character. Anyone who wants to change how a society thinks and acts will initially face skepticism or disinterest. Youth must at first sell not only an idea or a program, but themselves, to gain others' trust. Leadership therefore must involve both "inner" work (the person you are) and "outer" work (what you accomplish). When Albanian citizens stop Erion on the street to give him a hug and a thank-you, that personal connection serves a strategic purpose. Like Andrés and Agustín in Argentina, Erion finds that people support his organization both because of what he is doing and because of who he is. Why was Jennifer able to build Unite for Sight into a twenty-five-country network? Probably for two reasons: first, people sensed the gravity of the issue, and second, as one person shared about her, "she simply captures their imaginations."



While youth leaders must therefore paradoxically both “sell themselves” and remain authentic, this is ultimately not a contradiction. These youth are naturally admirable. What emerges consistently is evidence of qualities such as passion, commitment, a can-do spirit, flexibility, creativity, high standards, playfulness, credibility, and integrity. The youth often ignore the magnets of financial security and professional prestige in favor of a societal mission. They combine a mentality that is at once quixotic and practical. They happily mix their home and work lives. They are courageous to confront attitudes covered by the dust of the past. They go to the library to study when there are no grades, no scholarships, and no credentials for their effort. They fight for issues that really matter (but not to other people). They are spiritual – in the sense that hope, compassion, and inclusion are spiritual. That they do all this and keep a sense of fun and play makes their purpose-driven lives enviable.

### **VISIONARY LEADERSHIP** **Be a Boundary-Breaker**

The second dimension of this framework is visionary leadership. British playwright George Bernard Shaw’s oft-quoted maxim is, “Some people see things as they are and say ‘Why?’ But I dream things that never were and say, ‘Why not?’” Seinep dreamed of people with disabilities being given respect and opportunities in Kyrgyzstan. Stella dreamed of educating teens to prevent pregnancies and HIV/AIDS in Kenya. Jocelyn and Jessica dreamed of Canadians’ changing their everyday lives in a hundred small ways to foster environmental sustainability.

Having a dream, however, is very different than becoming a change agent. Bill Drayton of Ashoka explains that the job of a change agent (what he calls a social entrepreneur) “is to recognize when a part of society is stuck and to provide new ways to get it unstuck.” Youth are uniquely well adapted to play this role. They have what the Japanese call “beginner’s mind.” They see injustices, inconsistencies, and absurdities more quickly because they hold a different vantage point on society. For some of the youth in this book, that was because they lived the problem themselves. Other times they personally saw the impact on friends. Yet another group was moved by meeting people who were victims of that stuck society.

To get their societies “unstuck,” the youth created pattern-changing ideas. Fittingly, Erion’s organizational name translates as “Enough” and Maria’s as “Interruption.” Visionary leadership is about redirection. It is about both the process of change (think Dell’s distribution system for its computers) and the end-goal (think Apple Computer’s innovative products). As an example of “process” innovation, Jennifer set up a “distribution system” to deliver eye care in twenty-five countries. Marbie brought together three previously antagonistic Philippine tribes to work on sustainable agriculture. As an example of “product” innovation, Ha Thi Lan Anh started a youth-driven national radio show in Vietnam, where youth are traditionally taught that their place is to obey and respect their elders. Marbie’s goal was to foster organic farming just at the time when the world was moving toward increasing use of chemical fertilizers.

*The young people described in this book demonstrate six dimensions of leadership, which they mix and remix to meet specific needs.*

## KNOWLEDGE LEADERSHIP

### Be a Learner

The third dimension of the framework is knowledge leadership. If you want to make a film like Harjant, you have to know not only film production, but also marketing and distribution. If you want to teach music to Palestinian children, it helps (like Ramzi) to have studied to become an internationally renowned musician. For MJAFT! to influence the Albanian government, Erion set up a policy branch to conduct research and make recommendations. Vimlendu started “completely clueless” about the pollution of India’s Yamuna River, but spent weeks cloistered in the library to educate himself.

The message is clear. If you want to change the world, you have to study. The organizations in this book were, for the most part, founded by individuals who felt passionately about their cause (the poetry of change), but had little experience in management (the plumbing). They all realized that if you did your homework, as Ha Thi Lan Anh explained, “Then it will be harder for people to say no to you.”

Once youth change agents acquired training themselves, they often created systems for volunteers, communities, funders, and the government to catch up. Julia used her teacher education to train volunteers on how to engage children with special needs. Jennifer set up an online health course for Unite for Sight volunteers. Ha Thi Lan Anh taught young reporters basic journalism skills.

Sometimes what is most interesting about a data set is what is missing. In all of these case

studies, there is no mention that the youths’ formal educations played a significant role in their projects. They spent hundreds of hours using the library, searching the Internet, conducting travel-study, and being mentored; but all on their own time. This raises the question about what schools might do to better foster and connect students’ passion and work to the world around them.

## POLITICAL LEADERSHIP

### Be a Marketer and Collaborator

Innovative or transformative ideas are often born as orphans. Nobody initially recognizes them or claims them as their own. The goal of political leadership, the fourth dimension of the framework, is to mobilize public will – to turn orphan ideas into mainstream thought. That includes recruiting volunteers, forming cross-sector partnerships, securing media attention, and ultimately changing public opinion.

The projects in this volume span a wide range of issues. They include public health, the environment, youth development, economics, disabilities, agriculture, civic education, social marginalization, politics, and schooling. In all of these situations, members of the public were either unaware of the problem, didn’t care about the problem, didn’t think they could have an impact, or actively opposed any change. Addressing such perspectives is the job of political leadership.

How did these youth mobilize public will? They did so in multiple, inventive, and culturally specific ways. MJAFT! mobilized over one hundred people to cover the Albanian national telecom building



*The goal of “political leadership” is to mobilize public will.*

with toilet paper to protest poor management and high prices (prices were lowered). When a minister of the interior punched a journalist, MJAFT! sent instant messages on cell phones to over two hundred journalists, who ran to the Ministry to shake their keys and demand that the official be removed (he resigned).

The youth in these stories were engaged in social or cause-based marketing (i.e., the selling not of products, but of ideas, attitudes, and behaviors). As a young politician, Muhamed has faced widespread public pessimism in Bosnia and Herzegovina. He helped create an “I Love Tuzla” campaign and placed a bust of Martin Luther King Jr. in the town center. Jessica and Jocelyn’s youth-oriented marketing included naming a program “Hopeful High School Hooligans” and constructing a website whose opening page pictures young people snoozing in sleeping bags. Kritaya spoke to Thai youth by writing a Top 40 “pop” song on changing the world.

Sadiqa faced some of the stiffest public opposition. How could she successfully advocate for female education in Afghanistan? She strategically invited mullahs and women to her home and based her case on the Qur’an. She quoted Mohammed’s commandment to all people to be educated. On a personal note, she also told stories of female Afghan refugees in Pakistan and the United States who were unable to secure jobs, housing, or food because they couldn’t read.

How we tell these stories about youth change agents can be misleading. What frequently gets overlooked is that even if an individual person does single-handedly invent a great idea, that innovation

never becomes reality without the collective support, talent, and resources of many people. These stories, if one looks closely, are overflowing with supportive friends, mentors, foundations, and other community-based organizations. The nature of this work requires youth to be collaborators. As Harjant comments, “Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a lot more than one person to make a successful feature or documentary.”

## **ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

### **Be an Entrepreneur**

Ancient Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu realized long ago that weakness can sometimes produce power, and that power can foster weakness. The “weakness” of youth is that they may lack prior knowledge, resources, connections, and experience. What makes them organizationally powerful (the fifth leadership dimension) is that they are willing to see things in new ways, live on little money, turn their homes into offices, practice just-in-time learning, value the participation of other youth, seek partnerships, and enjoy new adventures. In most debates, this gives them the moral high ground – territory that is deeply important when one is trying to change the world.

Otesha offers an excellent example of weakness as power. Sometimes not having funding can work to your advantage (many nongovernmental organizations, I’m sure, would beg to differ with me on this). Because the Otesha organization must rely on the kindness of people throughout Canada to support their cross-country bike rides – lending lawns to pitch tents and holding potluck meals to feed hungry riders – these hospitable strangers



*Sadiqa employed various creative strategies in advocating for female education in Afghanistan.*

become stronger supporters. If you want people to get involved and support your organization, you have to give them something meaningful (and in this case fun) to do. Otesha simultaneously secured free services and built their constituency.

These youth possessed many of the qualities identified with "social entrepreneurs" (those that use an entrepreneurial mindset to create social – rather than business – products and services). These qualities include being:

1. **RESOURCEFUL.** *No better example exists than Harjant, who made a moving, eight-minute film for less than U.S.\$200. He recruited his twin brother as the lead actor, borrowed a friend's camera, and edited the piece on a computer in the public library.*
2. **OPPORTUNISTIC.** *Unite for Sight became an international organization "by chance." A medical school student learned through a local NGO in Ghana that nobody in an entire village had functional eyeglasses. To help address this essential need, Jennifer sent a volunteer team to provide eye care, and UFS's work in developing countries was born.*
3. **"GEEKS."** *There are multiple examples, already cited, of how these youth used cell phones, email, the Internet, and websites to help fulfill their mission. The message for change agents is clear: "Be a Geek." To see a compelling example, view Jennifer's website at [www.uniteforsight.org](http://www.uniteforsight.org).*
4. **STRATEGIC.** *When Ha Thi Lan Anh initiated a national radio program to educate her country about youth aspirations, she made a strategically sound move. Rural Vietnamese farmers listen to the radio over loudspeakers while they work in the fields, giving her a built-in audience.*
5. **CULTURALLY FITTING.** *In India, Jyoti campaigned to break cultural barriers for women to be leaders.*

*She realized that she would gain more support if she was soft-spoken and assertive rather than loud and aggressive.*

6. **BIG PICTURE THINKERS.** *The projects in this volume are at different stages of development, from small pilot efforts to large international organizations. In all cases, however, the youths' goal is not to form a successful organization, but to change their country in fundamental ways.*
7. **PERSONALLY ORGANIZED.** *Jennifer was able to teach school full time and spend sixty hours a week on Unite for Sight. Think about how organized she had to be!*
8. **ACCOUNTABLE.** *Social entrepreneurs continually focus on results. Several of the organizations built in systematic evaluations of the impact of their work.*



*The projects, while ranging from small pilot efforts to international organizations, each seek to change society in fundamental ways.*

## **SOCIETAL LEADERSHIP**

### **Be a Transformer**

We live in a world where it is said that a butterfly that flaps its wings on one side of the planet ultimately affects the weather on the other side a month later. What this volume portrays is a different type of globalization – a globalization of youth-driven social and environmental change, or, as the International Youth Foundation calls it, a YouthActionNet. Its potential for convergence is too often overlooked.

These stories are important in their own right, but also for what they represent as a collective whole. It is provocative that youth in Albania and Argentina are simultaneously combating citizen apathy, that youth in India and the Philippines are struggling to clean up their environment, and that youth in Thailand and Mexico are involving young people in service learning.

Perhaps what is most important to understand about their collective societal leadership is that, as European business writer Luc de Brabandere explains, “To change is to change twice.” It is necessary both to change the world (reality) and how people see the world (perception). The first changes essential life conditions, but the second creates an environment in which much more can take place.

Tang understood this. He implemented a peer education program to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS (i.e., the structure), but his deeper goal was to reduce the stigma and discrimination experienced by those with the disease in China (i.e., the culture). Likewise Seinep provided counseling and programs for disabled youth, but knew that her long-term goal was to secure public acceptance of rights for those with special needs. Ultimately, it is often small, grassroots social innovations like these that influence policymakers, governmental programs, and whole countries far beyond their humble beginnings.

Importantly, these youth not only changed their countries; they changed themselves. Jessica shared: “Looking at myself I can also see a very different person from the young woman who sat in despair almost three years ago. I hold the realization that there is nothing I would rather be doing, nothing that gives me more hope, than the work I am so privileged to do.”

### **CLOSING**

Michelangelo left a large number of his statues *non finito* (unfinished). The result is that these works seem to be in a constant state of emerging

out of the marble. The statues offer a glimpse of the hope, beauty, and power that is possible through human imagination, while simultaneously conceding that the work is not yet over.

This is the same for the lives of those young people in this book, as well as for ourselves. Our work is still emerging out of the marble block that life has given each of us. Seinep’s marble block was to be born with infantile cerebral palsy. Vimlendu’s was to be born next to a great but polluted river. Tang Kun’s was to be born shy, but to overcome that for a higher calling.

Their stories confirm not the “great people” theory of history, but that we are all called to lives of purpose and action. As Jocelyn shared: “We have learned that it is rare that youth are shown the power and opportunities they have today – everyday! – to work towards their ideal world, to truly be the change they want to see.” These stories show what is possible if they are. Governments, schools, NGOs, international organizations, and foundations are left to explore how they can support many more youth globally to write their own stories of hope and societal progress. ■



*In China, Tang pursued a twofold approach: preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and changing societal perceptions of those with the disease.*