The Thing Before The Thing
- Making the **Sustainable Development Goals** work

Liberating the leadership potential of everyone in the community

We are on the eve of two pivotal moments for the world's future. That sounds like a grand statement, but in the case of this autumn it's true. The world meets in Paris this December to decide on the global response to the climate crisis and world meets right now (September 2015) to revisit its achievements against the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and set the sails of world governments and NGO's to change the course of global poverty and community development for the next 15 years. These new goals will rightly be named *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDG's) because they will focus on a sustainable, equitable future for not just everyone on the planet, but the planet itself. Sustainable growth means a world where the livelihoods of the worlds poorest grows, where that growth is fair for everyone not just some, and in a way that the planet can support for the long arc of human history. (Sachs 2015)

The SDG's will cover a comprehensive range of 17 key areas under six rough headings – **Dignity**, (end poverty and fight inequality) **People**, (ensure healthy lives, knowledge and inclusion of women and children) **Planet**, (protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children) **Partnership**, (catalyse global solidarity for sustainable development) **Justice**, (promote safe and peaceful societies and strong institutions) and **Prosperity**, (grow a strong inclusive and transformative economy). (The Guardian January 2015)   Whilst the MDGs were a global *'Stop! Change direction'*, the SDGs are a striking out for a global, inclusive, sustainable future for our children's children (our children are already here and inheriting our unsustainable world). The SDGs build on the MDGs in clear ways but add the necessary depth to a very complex set of issues.

So what will happen next? When the decision makers all return to their homes from the UN conference in New York where they are to ratify the SDGs, what will be their next steps? Some will do little, but the committed will liberate funding through governments and through the big foundations to turn these 17 commitments and their sub goals into projects. Many, many, many

projects that will seek to make a measurable impact on each SDG. Small projects, big projects, short projects, long projects. Verdict? There will be successes, failures and everything in between and this is the necessary and normal curve for making any kind of lasting change.

But something is missing. We will rightly see projects to ensure more girls get education, more communities get clean water, more youth learn entrepreneurial skills and table banking, more skills taught to more local communities to make them safer, projects for better sanitation, governance, micro finance and a multitude of other necessary interventions. But, if all of these projects are the 'thing' to make the SDG's a reality, then what is 'the **thing** before the thing'? All of these projects have one thing in common - people. The critical success factor is people. Obvious, but worth thinking through. We know that there is no sustainable change in any area of life - personal, relational, families, groups, communities, institutions....all of the dimensions necessary to make the SDGs happen - without leadership.....and leadership is a people issue. The simplest definition of leadership is Gardner's (Leading Minds 2011)

> *"Leadership is the ability to create a story that affects the thoughts, feelings and actions of others"*

Two things become important for any project to be effective. Firstly, we need people who are leading the projects to be able to lead, not just manage a project. They need to know how to write a different story that will affect outcomes, people's thinking, people's feelings and people's actions.   But secondly and perhaps more importantly, we need to liberate the leadership potential of every single person who the project is seeking to influence.

If every individual in the community is not seeing themselves as a leader, someone who has a unique story to write, someone who has got hold of their own pen to write that story, someone who sees it both as their responsibility and within their ability to respond (response-ability) to write this story, then change won't happen and it won't be sustained. The classic case in point is when Emerging Leaders visited the Buganga Islands of Lake Victoria to deliver its **Leadership For Hope** programme to 300 islanders. With every developmental issue imaginable there was also the issue of clean water. Development agencies had delivered key projects to the Islands and created three water pumps. A good and vital outcome. The problem was that none of the pumps were working; they had all broken and the issues ranged from *"it's their problem, those who made the pumps, to fix them"* through to *"we don't know how to fix them".* As is often the case in the most challenged communities everyone is waiting for "them" to come and fix it.

It is this very challenge of how to create "the thing before the thing" that galvanised me back in 2005 to start the work of Emerging Leaders (www.emerging-leaders.net) . Seeing the issues of inter generational poverty in the slums of Lusaka, Zambia had me asking, *"what is it that creates change, so that these amazing projects I am seeing can get traction, be really effective, make lasting change?"*
What we discovered is that personal and community transformation, increased community safety, well being and livelihoods, all need 'a thing before the thing', they all need a community wide programme of liberating the Leadership potential of everyone, whether in formal leadership positions, informal leadership positions or no leadership positions at all. The necessary precondition for successful projects is to liberate everyone's leadership potential. What we discovered is that it is not only possible, it is highly effective. The head of world Vision in one African country said *'this programme is a game changer in community development'* and that he'd seen a greater effectiveness in all his projects in one month following the training, than in the previous five years.

What are the core ideas and principles that need to be made available to the hearts and heads of everyone at the grassroots level?
- Everyone is a leader
- Everyone has potential
- Their potential can be called out of them because it's dormant, not dead
- The pivot of all change is based on Awareness and Responsibility, so when people see how their lives are being kept in poverty because of their own, systemic and inter generational poverty-mindsets, then they can now take responsibility to change.

Mind set change is fundamental before any of the SDG projects will take root.
Leadership principles have been around for a few thousand years. They may not be easy but they are simple. They can be taught to people with little or no educational background and they work to create transformation at every level. For example when peoples mindsets change and they see themselves as a leader, they automatically see women in a different light, they automatically see the benefit of education (Impacct Ltd 2014) Leadership can be taught to a five year old or a ninety five year old. If you put these thoughts together in a simple accessible way and present them in an inspiring enough way, then whole communities can be trained and the leadership potential of the majority can be released. Dandora, a challenged community built on Nairobi's city rubbish dump has just held its first community wide competition for the most effective community within the wider community. It started with a group of youth being trained in 'the thing before the thing', leadership, and without prompting they took responsibility for community security, well-being and livelihoods. Piles of rubbish became rows of vendor shops and street gardens and 'farms', youth took themselves back to school and colleges, started up community projects and even built Dandora's first ever library. Such was the impact that fifty other communities within the area imitated them and now they are all in a competition for who will be the most renewed community.

As we sit on the starting grid for the second chapter of working with all seriousness and intent to create a sustainable future for the planet and all of us who do and will live on it, we need to ensure that the seriousness includes a commitment to ' the thing before the thing'; to providing leadership development in simple accessible ways to the populations of the world who will be the beneficiaries of the crucial projects for change that will follow. Providing leadership development to the worlds most vulnerable communities ensures that the SDGs will both gain traction and will stick for the long haul.