

**Translating the Global into the Local: Leadership in Community and Agricultural Development**

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*Enterprise and innovation are as much about people and culture as ideas. How can leadership help to harness entrepreneurship and innovation to combat the global recession?*

Nadine Levin  
Registration 354  
Medical Anthropology  
Green Templeton College

## **Introduction: The Local Impacts of the Global Recession**

As the world struggles to recover from the impacts of the global recession, it looks toward leaders to articulate problems, analyze risks, and provide innovative solutions. Discussions of the global recession have largely focused on the problems faced by the developed world, and have not acknowledged the recession's full scope and severity. In the modern, globalized world, networks of exchange—economic, technological, sociocultural, and political—have expanded and connected economies and cultures in complex ways. The world's leaders have failed to address how the impacts of the global recession extend beyond the developed world and into the developing world (Gentile 2009). Because this international drama is played out not just in the abstract realm of policy, but also in the everyday lives of people, we must examine how the global recession is manifested in local settings.

The aftershocks of the global recession in developing countries—substantial declines in trade and in investments in emerging markets—indicate that we are only beginning to understand the full toll that the global recession has taken on the poorest areas of the world. The dramatic declines in economic growth experienced by Sub-Saharan Africa and the ups and downs of the United States economy are not disparate processes. Because the global economy is interconnected, economic declines in the developing world extend beyond regional borders, and will soon have tangible impacts on the economies and health of the developed world (Sachs 2009).

The situation in developing countries appears even more dire when we consider the specific, tangible impacts of the global recession on the poor living in developing countries—people who have neither played a role in creating the recession, nor have the capacity to respond. Impoverished communities “lack the personal and societal buffers that enable those in richer countries to weather the economic storm” (Sachs 2009), and experience economic instability as a life-or-death situation (Harrison 2009). While reduced economic growth has caused stocks to decline in developed world, it has exacerbated the struggle to pay for basic commodities like food and medicine in the developing world (Afrol 2009).

Despite a long-standing commitment to poverty eradication by the developed world, the financial troubles caused by the global recession have cast the status of foreign aid into doubt (Schneider 2009). But as the poor get poorer and the rich get richer, it is clear that

the need for international assistance in the developing world is not going to subside. Now more than ever, it is imperative to strategically re-evaluate the way that both the global recession and its potential solutions are perceived. As the world's leaders tackle broad problems and look for ways to spur economic growth, they must consider how to make "each dollar, yen, or euro spent on [aid] more efficient and sustainable" (Schneider 2009).

In the midst of an era of serious economic constraint, community development provides an effective way to combat the impacts of the global recession in the developing world. Community development trains communities to effect long-term change, and empowers them to thrive in the face of reduced spending and foreign aid. When carried out effectively, community development can foster innovative solutions and provide a sustainable model for change. But community development must be approached with caution: its implementation in practical situations can be difficult, and broad aims like "development" must be given specific meanings (Mansuri 2004). Ultimately, community development proves to be ineffective unless it takes local contexts into account and is made meaningful to target populations.

For community development to be successful, leaders must be able to translate global ideas into local practices. It is critical that leaders in community development present broad concepts in ways that can be understood locally and used by communities in local contexts. Ideas must extend beyond the arena of development discourse, and must reach the peoples and cultures that are the heart and focus of initiatives. It is not enough for leaders to identify specific interventions as appropriate, or to provide the skills and tools communities need to participate. For true innovation and change to occur, leaders must convince people that their participation is not only vital, but also worth the risk.

In this essay, I draw upon my experiences with communities in Lake Victoria, Western Kenya, to discuss the challenges of community development and leadership in the developing world. I will explain how a local project to develop organic agriculture arose as a potential response and solution to more mainstream, productivity-centered notions of agricultural innovation. In addition, I will discuss why organic agriculture is a locally-relevant and important initiative for the communities living on the shores of Lake Victoria, and also how leadership is a key element for "translating" the concept of organic agriculture so that it is adopted and implemented by local communities despite its possible risks.

## **Agricultural Development: Using Leadership to Address the Concept and Risks of “Organic”**

As the global recession forces the world’s leaders to critically evaluate spending on foreign aid to developing countries, community development provides a cost-efficient, sustainable strategy to address poverty and health. Community development initiatives that focus on agriculture are particularly important for addressing poverty, as “agriculture is a crucial economic activity, providing employment and livelihoods for many and serving as the basis for many industries” (The Encyclopedia of Earth 2007). In many developing countries, where the majority of the rural poor rely on agriculture for their survival, ensuring adequate food and nutrition is one of the most important ways to combat disease and poverty. Agricultural development, therefore, provides a long-term, sustainable approach that does not simply provide aid, but rather improves infrastructure, resilience, and capacity (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2009).

Historically, agricultural development has focused on improving agricultural productivity. This approach, which formed the cornerstone of the Green Revolution of the 1960s-80s<sup>1</sup>, and which continues to be used by many development programs, has attempted to address the gap between food production and population growth by improving crop yields (Havnevik 2008). Unfortunately, this focus on productivity has come at the expense of the environment and long-term food security. The use of chemicals and the practice of intensive monoculture have caused serious environmental degradation, which has reduced the long-term fertility of the soil and the viability of entire ecosystems. In addition, resource-intensive techniques have not only strained the world’s natural resources, but have also proved unfeasible for many farmers who are too poor to purchase inputs like seeds, fertilizers, and pesticides. As a result, addressing agricultural development through increased productivity is an unsustainable strategy, and calls for a re-evaluation of the way that we conceptualize using agricultural development to improve livelihoods.

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<sup>1</sup> The Green Revolution was a large-scale agricultural development project that was important but also highly problematic: “During the Green Revolution, which took place from the 1960s to the 1980s, improvements in staple crops like maize, wheat, and rice helped double the amount of food produced, save hundreds of millions of lives, and drive broader development throughout much of Asia and Latin America...Unfortunately, the benefits of the Green Revolution did not extend to Sub-Saharan Africa. Over the past 25 years, as the rest of the world has doubled, tripled, and even quadrupled productivity, agricultural productivity in Sub-Saharan Africa has stagnated.” (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation 2009)

For many farmers living in the developing world, organic agriculture can provide a sustainable, innovative alternative to conventional agriculture. Organic agriculture is defined as “a system of agricultural production that seeks to promote and enhance an ecosystem’s health while minimizing adverse effects on natural resources” (United Nations Environment Programme 2008). Importantly, organic agriculture can improve food security and conserve resources by taking advantage of “low-cost, locally available and appropriate technologies” (United Nations Environment Programme 2008). Organic farming is a truly innovative solution to poverty and rural economic development because it not only attempts to make agriculture less resource- and external input-dependent (Kilcher 2007), but also utilizes a holistic approach that “address[es] many different causal factors simultaneously” (United Nations Environment Programme 2008).

The problems posed by conventional agricultural development are particularly visible on the shores of Mfangano Island in Lake Victoria, Western Kenya, where I conducted my research. Here, communities rely upon a combination of cash-crop fishing and subsistence farming to secure food and income, and engage in a daily struggle to cope with poverty and disease. Mfangano Island is a beautiful but extremely remote place, accessible only by a 2-hour ride in a wooden canoe, and is home to one of the highest rates of HIV/AIDS in the world—a staggering 33 percent<sup>2</sup>. In the past decade the Lake Victoria region has experienced a serious decline in the fishing industry<sup>3</sup>, which has caused an increased dependence on productivity-oriented agricultural techniques that have ultimately caused ecological degradation and declining agricultural yields. The combination of these factors—the increasing rates of HIV/AIDS and the declining fishing and farming industries—has led to a situation of chronic economic instability. Even in a place as remote as Mfangano Island, where the majority of resources are devoted to procuring basic commodities, the effects of the global recession are profound.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from informal statistical data collected by the Kenyan Ministry of Health.

<sup>3</sup> The fishing industry in the Lake Victoria Basin revolves around the fishing, processing, and trade of the fresh-water species Nile Perch, a non-native, carnivorous fish species that was introduced into Lake Victoria in the 1950s, and which has since caused serious ecological and economic changes. In the short term, the explosive population growth of Nile Perch significantly improved economic conditions and livelihoods in the area, creating a multitude of jobs and saving the Lake Victoria fishing industry from collapse. However, in the long term the Nile Perch has not only destroyed the lake’s natural biodiversity and ecological viability, but has also caused fundamental changes in economic and social relations. Since the 1980s, the expansion of the fishing industry in Lake Victoria has altered settlement patterns and labor relations, and has arguably led to increases in gender inequality, malnutrition, and HIV/AIDS. For more information, see *Fishing farmers' or 'farming fishermen'... household income and nutritional security on the Kenyan shores of Lake Victoria* (1997) by K. Geheb.

Communities are vulnerable to even the smallest changes in daily income, which can mean the difference in having food on the table, or in being able to afford important medicines. Thus, there is a great need to invest in sustainable, cost-effective agriculture development in order to improve livelihoods and economic stability.

In light of the complex problems affecting livelihoods in the Lake Victoria region, the local organization for which I worked, Organic Health Response<sup>4</sup> (OHR), has been exploring the potential benefits of organic farming in the communities of Mfangano Island. OHR is working closely with local farmers to develop organic agriculture as part of a holistic response to the combined problem of increasing rates of HIV/AIDS and declining economic livelihoods. Importantly, the development of organic agricultural on Mfangano Island has provided insight into the pivotal role leadership plays in giving local meaning to broad, western concepts like “organic agriculture.”

On Mfangano Island, leadership has provided a key element for communicating why organic agriculture is an important strategy for agricultural development within the ecological and cultural context of the island. The challenge for leadership in OHR has been to translate Western concepts of “sustainability” and “ecological degradation” into terms that make sense within the local community. As an educated graduate student, I have seen that corn monoculture is causing environmental degradation such as soil erosion and deforestation, and that the dominance of corn in the local diet is contributing to malnutrition, disease, and long-term food insecurity. However, local communities see corn monoculture quite differently: it is a farming practice that has been passed on for several generations, and which increases immediate yields of the staple crop that both feeds families and forms the basis of the local cuisine.

Therefore, even if the benefits of organic agriculture are clear to those who lead agricultural development on Mfangano Island, in order for programs to be truly successful, leaders must help members of the local communities to understand why organic farming is an important and sustainable alternative to conventional farming. Local people must engage with the idea that organic farming is less resource-intensive, and that it can be carried out using locally-available and affordable materials. Leaders, therefore, must move

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, please refer to official Organic Health Response material, which can be found at: <http://mattswriting.com/The%20Global%20Micro-Clinic%20Project%20Partners%20with%20the%20Organic%20Health%20Response.pdf>.

beyond the realm of abstract ideas, and must translate the global concept of “organic” into specific local initiatives.

To do this, OHR is working with local farmers to understand the challenges posed by conventional agriculture, and to initiate a dialogue about how specific organic farming techniques like intercropping, pest control with local ingredients, and composting can improve soil fertility and crop yields. For example, OHR has worked with local organic farmer Joel Oguta<sup>5</sup> to understand his work within the growing conditions on Mfangano Island, and also to promote his success with organic agriculture as a positive example within the community. Ultimately, leadership has enabled OHR to successfully communicate with the community—in locally- and culturally-relevant terms that draw upon the specific context of ecological degradation and health on Mfangano Island—that the transition to organic agriculture can lead to significant improvements in livelihoods and health.

Despite the benefits of organic agriculture, it is not a be-all-end-all solution to poverty and development. Organic farming entails a number of risks that must be considered in relation to the already precarious economic situation of the communities on Mfangano Island. Leaders, therefore, must convey the challenges of organic farming, and must also convince communities that organic agriculture is important enough to merit the risks. Leaders must not only communicate the local importance and relevance of global ideas, but also make a persuasive case that motivates people to participate in risky processes of change.

With the case of organic agriculture on Mfangano, the risks are two-fold. Firstly, much of the research on and practical experience with organic agriculture has been conducted in developed countries, where the climate and growing conditions are very different from those found in the tropical and sub-tropical regions of the developing world. While assessments of local conditions on Mfangano Island indicate that organic agriculture is a beneficial alternative, the lack of empirical evidence in developing countries makes the success of organic agriculture in the long-run unclear (Freyer 2007). Secondly, successful organic agriculture is “a know-how-intensive farming method. To be competitive, organic farmers need to experiment with new techniques, and must manage land, labour, capital

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<sup>5</sup> Joel Oguta is also one of the founding members of Organic Health Response. His generosity and care for the community has largely made the project possible.

and innovations quite differently from conventional farmers” (Kilcher 2007). The requirement for flexibility and experimentation is difficult in resource-poor settings; because subsistence farmers rely almost exclusively on agriculture for their food, any negative impacts on harvests have serious impacts on livelihoods and health.

Acknowledging these risks, OHR is using leadership in several ways to address the challenges presented by the transition from conventional to organic agriculture. Over the past year OHR has worked with local groups to build a community center that is equipped with a library, a space for teaching, and a computer lab with internet connectivity. These facilities, when complete, will enable leaders to more effectively communicate with the community, and will provide access to information (via educational speakers, books, and technology) that is critical to learning new organic agricultural techniques. OHR is also working with local farmers to develop test plots and community gardens where people can put knowledge to a practical use by experimenting with organic farming techniques in local settings

Ultimately, OHR is using leadership to facilitate an important dialogue with local communities about the challenges and benefits of practicing organic agriculture on Mfangano Island. Leaders within the community have been able to provide farmers with the appropriate tools and understanding that they need to succeed, but in a way that realistically evaluates and addresses potential risks. The experiences of Joel Oguta illustrate how local leaders engage with risks to initiate processes of change:

*“My grandfather was the first to plant mango seeds on Mfangano Island. There is an old fear among the Suba that when a man plants a new type of tree, his life will end when the first fruit ripens. My grandfather assumed this risk so that our people here could grow mangos. Today my family is still respected around the island for this reason. If you are talking to me about a new type of seed, I am not afraid to plant it.”*

While Joel’s grandfather took a risk with new types of agriculture on his own, OHR is giving local farmers the support they need to experiment—through both access to information and hands-on experience—in ways that do not affect crop yields or livelihoods. Local leaders are giving the communities on Mfangano Island the chance to take risks and to initiate change, but in ways that minimize adverse impacts. Leadership is enabling OHR to show and convince communities, through practical and local initiatives, that organic farming is a locally-relevant, innovative, and beneficial alternative to conventional farming.

## **Conclusion: How Leadership’s Role in “Translating” and “Convincing” Can Combat the Global Recession**

My experiences on Mfangano Island, and particularly the time I spent talking with Joel about the complex problems in his community, have led me to realize how analyses of the global recession have overlooked the suffering of world’s poor. The struggles of the communities in the Lake Victoria region to pay for food and medicine are a poignant reminder that the effects of the global recession extend to local economies, and that decisions about foreign aid can have profound impacts in local contexts. Ultimately, the scope and the severity of the global recession demand a shift in how we think about global processes, and in how we think about making change in the world. In order to fully understand the nature of global problems and the effectiveness of possible solutions, we must look at the context-specific ways that larger issues play out. We must move beyond rhetoric and ideas, and reach out to local peoples and cultures.

Organic Health Response’s experiences on Mfangano Island show that we can effectively combat the local impacts of the global recession through community development, and in particular through organic agricultural development. While organic agriculture is not a miracle cure for the global recession, it is still a beneficial and locally-appropriate strategy. In developing rural communities such as Mfangano Island it can improve livelihoods and foster economic development in a sustainable, cost-effective way. Within Mfangano Island’s communities, leadership plays a pivotal role in the processes of “translating” and “convincing” global ideas into local concepts. Leaders are fundamental not only in communicating to people why global concepts like “organic agriculture” are meaningful in local contexts, but also in convincing people that their participation in real-world “experiments” is worth the potential risk.

But even if local communities can be convinced by leaders that initiatives can help, the question still remains: how can *we* be convinced that leadership is helpful and fundamental in particular contexts? Leadership’s role in translating and convincing is not limited to the communities of the developing world, but rather extends to the policy-making and grant-writing organizations of the developed world. Therefore, leaders in community development face the difficult task of having to communicate not only with people in local settings, but also with donor organizations who invest in community development in the global arena. Cultural considerations and risks are local and

contextual, but they are just as significant in the developed world as they are in developing world. Ultimately, successful leaders can make change only if they take the time to engage with processes of understanding, translating, and convincing on a global scale, but in local ways.

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