

Bringing a Little Bit of the World to Sudan

A Trainer's Journey

A letter from Michael Donnelly

In February 2009 I was sitting alongside Sandra Janoff in Derry City in Northern Ireland in near to zero temperature, about to facilitate a Future Search on developing a shared vision of success for the city and region. Derry is a run-down community, having suffered the worst of 30 years of civil conflict with polarisation and so many initiatives that had gone nowhere and it is a long way from Khartoum. But now there was hope, a common cause and an energy to get all the community – business, young people, civil society, government, politicians, educators, artists - working together to agree to a new way forward, that everyone could agree on and commit to working together to achieve. Sandra had co-created the Future Search methodology and the Future Search Network work that had brought Future Search to hundreds of communities around the world over the past 20 years.

In the midst of that, sitting together having a coffee, an email arrived from Abdel Rahman El Mahdi with confirmation that a Future Search training in Sudan was going to happen. Sandra and I began to get excited, very excited, at the possibilities and immediately began to plan how it could happen.

The brilliant vision of Abdel Rahman brought the process to reality and the opportunity to share what had been happening in communities all around the world was a massive motivation. In this part of the world we had heard about Sudan for all the wrong reasons and it resonates because Northern Ireland has suffered the same fate for years and years. We know too well the reality on the ground is that there are thousands of people and communities trying to do the right thing and to make a contribution to society building but are stuck with operating in the local conditions that discourage rather than encourage success.

So it was proved. Hooking up with a stalwart of the South African emergence, Dumisani Ncala, to deliver the training was a luxury. Here was someone who has optimism and reality in his very essence, having plotted a successful path through the worst of Apartheid and helping bring about inspirational change on the ground in South Africa.

So Dumisani and I arrived in Khartoum, me coming from sub zero temperatures in the depth of winter to a sunny warm climate, surrounded by sunny warm people. It was a breath of fresh air. The anticipation and the enthusiasm of everyone – from the organisers in Sudan, the sponsors in the World Bank and UN, and the hosts at the University of Khartoum, all made the process as easy and as fun, yet with diligent application.

Day one: we had to bring in extra chairs. There were 66 Sudanese, including academics, peace workers, donor agencies, and local government. It was the biggest group training to happen in years and sends a message to the rest of the world.

The greatest practical challenge was translation – this was the very first time this global process was being delivered in Arabic! So the concepts, the language, the history were crucial to deliver effectively. Without a formal translator the group looked after their needs and everyone pitched in with a helpful heart. We were able to explain how Future Search had been built on 80 years of action research in the social sciences, with

important lessons for how groups work together, how they can change the nature of debate by approaching complex issues from a certain angle, how they can work together to conceive a different, collective, inspiring future and agree what it is they can work on together to make success a reality. It resonated because the basics are the same no matter where you are in the world. That was obvious to the room and became even more so to me as the days passed.

Future Search has been proven to work. It has succeeded hundreds and hundreds of times in conflict zones, in congregations, in local communities as well as in governments, corporations, schools and universities. Telling those stories made it all come to life and presented a sense of opportunity.

We spoke of leadership, the right kind of leadership; one that asks people to be partners in the future, one that hands responsibility to the group to make things happen and one that facilitates action rather than smothers it and controls it.

The conclusion of the training identified dozens of live working opportunities where participants could tackle issues of concern – from education to accessing natural resources. We spoke of the sheer challenge of bringing all parties to the same table to talk together as equals – women and men, poor and wealthy, literate and illiterate, nomads and settled communities, local and international players.

I've been telling Sudan's story to hundreds of people since the event and in every conversation I hear goodwill and hope for a better future. The Future Search community is delighted and proud to have this experience as part of their growing community and are waiting to collaborate, support, share information and experiences to make success even more likely.

Shukran

Michael Donnelly

Future Search Network