



Visions Global Empowerment

A global nonprofit organization serving youth and communities through education

Empowering Society's Marginalized Youth through Leadership and Service

By: Gregory Buie

Imagine a world in which you are reminded with every passing day, sometimes subtly, other times overtly, that you are considered “less than”. You are told you are poor. You are told you will never rise above a certain level. You are told to “know your place” and act within those societally imposed parameters. From the shrewd wincing of a cashier trying to avoid your touch to the unconcealed eye rolling or tongue lashing of an outspoken traditionalist, you are made to feel your whole life as if you are lesser, as if your life does not bear equal meaning or importance.

For billions of people the world over this is more than a thought, it is a daily reality. Marginalized communities from Haiti to Senegal to Sri Lanka have experienced this perpetual discrimination as it manifests itself in myriad ways. This unfortunate truth, however, is not limited to simply developing countries. It affects every corner of the globe and every country on Earth.

Now, imagine flipping that narrative on its head and reinventing the message. Instead of buying into a fiction in which you know you are at the bottom of a cruel and unjust social hierarchy, you become limitless in your potential and boundless in the impact you can have on the world. That is the rationale behind the importance of teaching leadership to youth in communities that have faced historical prejudice, social discrimination, and immense daily hardship on account of racial, socioeconomic, or other factors beyond their control. By creating new possibilities, you can unleash a torrent of creativity, passion, talent, and skill that would otherwise go unrecognized. The result is not only personally transformative, but ripples through communities and societies along the way.

As a nonprofit organization committed to changing these patterns of inequality by supporting educational initiatives for youth affected by poverty and conflict, we believe strongly in educating the individual as a whole. A child's education goes far beyond formal academic instruction, yet opportunities for personality and life skills development in developing countries are few and far between. By offering support and resources outside of the formal classroom setting, we strive to give opportunities for youth to create, to explore, to question, to think analytically and critically, and to understand their world and their role within it. It is through these non-formal learning opportunities that the most growth often occurs. As opportunities for personal and educational growth increase, so do the standard of living and overall quality of life.

Our work does not stand alone, but rather builds off the ongoing efforts of our valued and vetted local partners who are the ones on the ground striving day in and day out to positively impact these young lives. In India, the Arcot Lutheran Church maintains a network of over 100 schools and 4 boarding homes, serving more than 20,000 Dalit and low-income children. As the primary education provider to many of these highly marginalized communities, they have developed a whole network of Children's Parliaments as well, working to instill a sense of citizenship and service in the youth whom they serve. And in Sri Lanka, the Church of the American Ceylon Mission runs a similar network of schools, training centers, and other social services that have assisted war-affected, displaced, and low income communities for decades, even through the most tumultuous years of the armed conflict. Neither organization makes any distinction

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based off religion, ethnicity, caste, gender, or any other classification when it comes to the communities they serve. None of our work is possible without the dedication, hard work, and true partnership of these organizations and passionate individuals behind them.

Over the past decade, my Visions colleagues and I have been toiling away at designing a leadership curriculum that is meaningful, practical, culturally relevant and appropriate, and innovative. Through an ongoing process of creating, testing, evaluating, and editing, we finally have a product in-hand that satisfies our objectives, taps into the already fantastic goal-driven work of our local partners, and has a proven track record. More than 1,600 youth have directly participated in one of our 32 leadership trainings held across 3 countries since 2003. These intense trainings, which are typically held over the course of a 6-day period and are implemented by teams of international and local volunteers, result in helping youth to establish Student Leadership Committees in their respective schools, boarding homes, or communities. The Visions leadership curriculum incorporates leadership and life skills lessons and activities, small group planning and events, readings and exercises in human rights, discussions on global and local issues, yoga, art, sports, and more.

In June 2013, we launched the long-awaited next phase of our leadership program—the Visions Leadership Academy. This new program is benefiting select youth who have already attended a full Visions youth introductory leadership & life skills training and were identified by local partner organizations as having the greatest leadership potential amongst their peers. Our goal is to develop the inherent leadership potential of these deserving and motivated youth from impoverished and disadvantaged backgrounds in both Sri Lanka and India through a year-round leadership enrichment program. Essentially, students invited into the academy will benefit from quarterly follow-up trainings (4 per year) and service visits (3 per year), and will be given material support and advisors for their leadership committee activities. An initial batch of 25 youth from Sri Lanka and 31 youth from India was selected to participate in the Visions Leadership Academy this year. Among them, those that later choose to go on and pursue higher education or other professional development will be encouraged to apply for a Visions Scholarship as well, demonstrating our deep commitment to them and our belief that an investment in every individual is an investment in our collective future.

Just a few months into this new program, and the impact is clear. Within a month of the launch, we were notified of the efforts of 8 of our students at the Siloam Girls Boarding Home in Thirukovilur, India who organized and implemented a plan to sell paper products in order to assist persons begging outside their boarding home compound. A number of the young women at the boarding home also donated locks of their hair to make wigs for cancer patients. The following month we received a report about another group of youth in our academy who organized an environmental awareness march, rally, and tree-planting program in which hundreds of people in the community participated. Other students are busy planning an upcoming service visit to a home for children affected by HIV/AIDS. All of these ideas emanated organically from the minds of the students themselves based off their local community needs and the avenues for local service work and service-minded causes available to them. What a difference these youth



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are now making in the lives of their communities, especially those most vulnerable persons. This is leadership in practice.

During our leadership trainings, we always strive to instill a sense of community, along with fostering a deep sense of personal responsibility towards helping those less fortunate, bringing the concepts of “empowerment” and “service” together. Through their actions, these young leaders are demonstrating that they themselves are not only *empowered*, they understand the importance and the responsibility of *service*. These ideas lie at the heart of good leadership. It is as if the ongoing efforts of our local partners combined with this new leadership academy have spiraled into a new emboldened and purpose-driven attitude, in which they have discovered a vast reservoir of talent, ability, and passion that they are now learning to harness and channel towards societal betterment. To see a whole cadre of society’s “have-nots”, and youth no less, demonstrate to the world and to themselves that they not only can, but will, be agents of change in their communities...well, that is nothing short of inspirational. Simply carve out an environment for youth to develop their inherent abilities and allow them to dream, and watch what happens. You might be amazed at how quickly they forget how supposedly inadequate and insignificant they were supposed to be...