SIDEKICK MANIFESTO II



Power, Proximity, and the Practice of Humility

edited by
shawn humphrey

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Preface

by *Shawn Humphrey*

"Shawn, it's been almost ten years since you published the Manifesto. Is there anything you would change?"

Ann Hendrix-Jenkins asked me that question a couple of years ago after a talk I gave on the original *Sidekick Manifesto*.

As I searched for an answer, thinking through the Manifesto's preambles and promises, I found myself talking about how difficult it is to inject nuance and complexity into a manifesto. A manifesto is meant to jolt. To be direct. Even brazen. You can't really add footnotes. It leaves little room for qualification.

By the time of Ann's question, it had been years since I worked abroad. Years since my students and I shut down La Ceiba—our microfinance institution in El Progreso, Honduras, which we operated for ten years.

Those ten years were full of relationships, mistakes, beautiful encounters, and hard-earned lessons.

Indeed, each of the ten promises in the original Manifesto is anchored in sometimes naïve, ego-driven, immature moments in Honduras. Moments of embarrassment that I can feel in my chest when I replay them.

Moments on me. Moments I own.

"The local leaders preamble," I answered.

I went on to explain.

After La Ceiba closed, I was left asking what's next? How can I be of use? To whom? Where?

No longer feeling comfortable working outside of the United States, I considered Appalachia. My people are from there. But they left almost a hundred years ago. And my Appalachian edges had long been smoothed away by too many years of industrialized schooling.

I no longer speak with the same twang my mamma does.

So, I found myself interrogating the concept of "local."

What is local? Am I local? Who gets to claim that word?

At what point do you stop being of a place?

What is the link between being "local" and being of use?

Those questions about "local" had me thinking more and more about pedigree.

Too often, the "problems" that dominate our imagination are identified by those with institutional pedigree—degrees, funding, access to traditional levers of power. Their vantage point shapes what does and does not count as a problem and which solutions are deemed credible.

But my being born and raised in a small blue-collar town taught me that there are other forms of pedigree—lived, relational, place-based. The pedigree that comes from sharing a community's inside jokes, eating at the diner where everyone raised each other's kids. The kind of pedigree that outsiders cannot import. The kind built on relationship collateral. Trust. The patience and long-term vision

that comes from knowing you will still be here tomorrow, next year, and the years after the outsiders leave.

Place-based pedigree is not measured in publications or degrees but in shared histories, metaphors, and rituals. Grieving the same traumas. Celebrating the same parades. Speaking the dialect. Understanding the slang. The particularities of how to shake another's hand.

Each kind of pedigree has strengths.

Institutional pedigree can bring tools, funding, and networks. Place-based pedigree brings legitimacy, continuity, and the discipline of proximity.

But neither is sufficient on its own.

Institutional pedigree without proximity can become extractive.

Place-based pedigree has its own hierarchies and exclusions. Not everyone gets to speak for "the local." And some problems (like climate change, pandemics, and structural poverty) stretch far beyond any single place and include multiple cultural and political jurisdictions.

So, what kind of pedigree does a particular problem demand? How do different forms of pedigree sit together without silencing one another? And perhaps most personally: What problem do I live next to? Where do I have enough proximity to be accountable?

Those questions led me not to another country, and not to Appalachia, but to the edge of a football field at my local public high school. That is where Ann found me when she asked her question. I was two years into volunteering as a coach of American football, working with the young men of my town. Who drive by my house yelling out their windows "Hey Coach!" Whose families walk by to chat while I'm watering my wildflower beds.

Ann's question launched this project. Soon after she asked it, I reached out to Laura, Santi, and Jeff (former students who worked through the original Manifesto alongside me, and who are now like family) and asked if they would join me. Then I reached out to my dear friend Jennifer Lentfer and asked her if she'd be willing to widen the circle.

She was. She did. So here we are.

Eighteen practitioners from across the Majority and Minority World. Together, we return to the original Manifesto's three preambles and ten promises. Not to polish them, but to interrogate them. Across the chapters that follow, contributors decide: Keep, Reimagine, or Discard.

It is time for me to step away and let nuance and complexity flood the forthcoming pages.

SIDEKICK MANIFESTO (2016)

WE HOLD THESE TRUTHS TO BE SELF-EVIDENT

Economic Development is . . .

A Complex and Costly Process of Collective Action

Community members with varied backgrounds, preferences, and capabilities must organize and transform themselves into a singular and powerful voice of change.

A Historically Anchored Process

The set of choices, strategies, and policies from which a community can choose to proceed is a function of the choices, strategies, and policies chosen in the past.

A Culturally Sensitive Process

Successful structural reforms in one community are not easily transplanted to another community.

A Political Process

Local, regional, and national politicians and power brokers must be held accountable if they are unresponsive to the interests of their communities.

A Long-Term Process

It is a struggle that takes decades, and not years.

LOCAL LEADERS WITH **LOCAL** SOLUTIONS TO **LOCAL** PROBLEMS

THEY WILL END POVERTY.
WE WILL NOT.

WE ARE ONLY VISITORS # WHO DO NOT SHARE THEIR HISTORY # WHO DO NOT SHARE THEIR CULTURE # WHO DO NOT PAY THEIR TAXES # WHO DO NOT VOTE IN THEIR ELECTIONS # WHO ARE ONLY ENGAGED FOR SHORT DURATIONS OF TIME # WHO HAVE NEVER ENDED OUR OWN POVERTY

In the story of poverty's end, we cannot be HEROES.

WE ARE SIDEKICKS.

Take the SIDEKICK Pledge

I Will Ride in the Sidecar.

I will not lead. I will listen as those already doing the difficult work of building a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities define and determine how to end poverty.

I Will Ignore Sirens Singing Songs of Scale.

Building dignified relationships is a mutual process of learning about and from one another. This takes patience, humility, and authenticity—these things cannot be rushed or easily scaled.

I Will Question the Utility of My Utility Belt.

Technology and gadgets are helpful (sometimes), but they do not address the root causes of poverty. Poverty is about power and politics.

I Will Be the Constant Understudy.

A crucial reason that good intentions so often fail is a lack of self-

critique. I will always be listening, learning, and seeking a deeper understanding of my role in the story of poverty's end.

I Will Welcome My Sidekick Slaps.

I will make mistakes. When I do, I will take responsibility, hold myself accountable, and act differently moving forward.

I Will Step Out of the Spotlight.

Sustainable solutions to poverty come from within, are bottom-up, and flow from local leaders who take the risks of holding their politicians accountable and challenging the status quo.

I Will Exercise Narrative Humility.

I cannot know another's story of material poverty. I don't know how it began or how it will end. It is not my story. Before sharing it with others, I will seek permission: No More Stolen Stories.

I Will Explore My Dark Side.

I will ask, "Do I want poverty to end? Who would I be without it? What would I do? Do my politics and consumption patterns perpetuate poverty? Am I complicit in its persistence?"

I Will Read Ivan Illich's "To Hell with Good Intentions" Again and Again.

Politicians, celebrities, and billionaire philanthropists will tell me that I can be a hero. I cannot. The poor are not powerless or waiting to be saved. Illich will check my delusions of grandeur.

I Will Hang up My Cape.

In my search for meaning and significance, I will learn to turn inward and activate my own agency before trying to eradicate another's material poverty—which I cannot.

Introduction

by *Jennifer Lentfer*

My friend and I arrived in the room full of strangers just as the community meeting was starting. We found our way to a couch at the side of the room and sat down as people began to share why they had joined this first meeting about mutual aid.

It was clear that the meeting conveners were excited about mutual aid as a concept, which had come into more mainstream public consciousness during the early months of the COVID-19 epidemic. What was also clear to me was that the conveners had no community organizing experience.

Mutual aid was being presented as a departure from the norms of charity, social services, and non-profitization. That's part of why I was there. I wanted to connect with people in north Omaha who understood mutual aid as a political act in which people don't just call their elected officials but actually take responsibility for caring for their neighbors in real time, material ways. It's about addressing each other's survival needs, based in an awareness about why those needs aren't being met.

Some people at the meeting were quick to share that they were on the "right" side of history and happily credentialed their knowledge

of mutual aid. The Black Panthers and Dean Spade were haughtily referenced.

In the unstructured, unmanaged discussion louder voices took up all the air in the room. Group leaders were asked questions about their "vision" for the group, and this was handed back to us as if some magical collective decision-making would suddenly arrive with the answer. The royal "we" was thrown around liberally as if there was cohesion among us despite multiple lived experiences, perspectives, truths, and identities in the room. The level of anxiety, performance, discomfort—including my own—was palpable.

After two hours, I knew this was a group in which I did not want to invest more of my time. This was something I interrogated deeply because I long for a political "home." Was my ego in the way of my "getting involved"?

I could see that there were too many traps set for this group found in individualism and people's need for external validation. There were too many people there wanting to be seen as one of the "good ones." It was the presence and imposition of "woke" and yet unconscious saviorism, the group awash in free and blatant advice giving. There were no guardrails to ensure any accountability and zero awareness of safety or surveillance.

***

The internet used to be a fun place. Being "online" was a relatively new experience, and we were excited to connect with like-minded people all over the world, exchanging experiences and ideas.

It was on Twitter that many of us who were concerned about the state of international cooperation and poverty reduction strategies met up. We critiqued approaches, yes, but what I was grateful for was confirmation that it wasn't just me. There were other people who were also sitting in the cognitive dissonance between the

promise of "doing good" "over there" and the actual difficulty and complexity of "making a difference" anywhere.

Enter the *Sidekick Manifesto*.

Here was a comic and a resource offering an alternative to saviorism. An invitation for the "helpers" to decenter themselves. A suggestion for a paradigm shift. A collective expression and a monograph.

Ten years later, we offer this reimagined collective expression, building on what has been learned since the *Sidekick Manifesto* was birthed. As each chapter digs into one of the original statements of the pledge, readers are invited to update our understandings and continue to re-orient ourselves to the complex endeavor of "doing good."

Ten years later, the veil continues to be lifted on the magnitude of evil that feeds global oppression and inequality. Each day the impunity that protects vested economic interests and the resources that are exercised to spread and enact violence on a massive scale are on display.

Recent years have revealed the extent of global sex-trafficking that feeds the elite, the extent to which they deem themselves entitled to other humans as a luxury good, young women a commodity to be traded. These men in power are the crafters of our current dominant cultural scripts, rooted in control, extraction, domination, and superiority. And now we see how this is embedded in everything—from our most intimate relationships to our largest institutions.

These continued "revelations" call do-gooders in this time to understand just how fundamental the changes have to be. What happens when we can no longer believe in Hollywood narratives of a benevolent nation or superhero?

The call, which was also present in the original *Sidekick Manifesto*, is to dismantle systems of oppression—in ourselves first. In ourselves first, because each and every one of us is capable of violence through control, extraction, domination, and superiority. So much more has been revealed about how violences, no matter the scale, have the same roots. Knowing this changes how good can be done.

> "We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it." — Wendell Berry, The Long-Legged House[1]

As the *Sidekick Manifesto* encouraged do-gooders to challenge the "white is right" supremacy and "West is best" superiority being peddled as charity in the 21st century, these days I'm seeing how the concept of heroism in and of itself is problematic. When we can no longer trust our leaders, the elite, or mainstream media discourse, I'm asking: *What if there are no heroes?*

Abusers use the binary of hero and victim to self-justify their actions. They are the heroes of their own story until called into accountability, then the retreat to victimhood keeps them immune from vulnerability. Heroism also leaves change in the realm of the individual, when systems change and collective action may be the only way of survival under poverty or under authoritarianism.

Ten years ago, the *Sidekick Manifesto* dared to acknowledge that helping and harm could be linked and offered a tool in the untangling of charity from colonial matrixes of power. Since then, I've learned that the more I can accurately describe violence when it's happening—from intimate relationships to the global configuration of nation-states—the more options to violence become apparent.

A decade ago, the Sidekick's mandate was to support local leaders, with your special talents and gifts, and to check your ego. It was to revel in taking a back seat. What if to be a sidekick today is to no longer tend to a heroes' needs, but to bring about the alternatives to violence that can serve us all?

Perhaps the opposite of violence, of enacting force, is to stay. Invitation, consent, care. To be still. To absorb, resist. Or is it to move, shift, work with and around? To duck, avoid, release, flow. To embrace, merge. Coming together, melding, working in tandem, collaborating, teaming up.

Me → We. That's what the *Sidekick Manifesto* is about for me ten years later.

I've learned that true generosity is giving without recognition and sharing without conditions. For me, me-to-we means when I have the impulse to jump in or give advice, I have to make sure I'm not just trying to deal with my own emotional dysregulation by "shoulding" on someone else. I've learned that the path from a transactional way of being to a relational way of being has a stop at acting upon positive obligation.

Today, I believe to be a sidekick is to understand leadership as a spectrum of skills and experiences. It doesn't look like a person at the top who has all the answers or rescues others. It looks like a person who connects, listens, discerns, facilitates.

To be a sidekick is to be a witness to violence—to not look away, to not have short memories or shallow analysis. It is to unlearn our violences and continually strengthen our muscles, most importantly the heart, to apply force rarely, gingerly, joyfully, humbly. To apply force only when necessary, with care and intention and accountability.

Warmongers and marketers condition and coerce people to take sides, a false choice created to further expand a crevasse of

polarization and disconnection. This decade has taught me that when presented with a binary like hero or victim, good guy or bad guy, ally or enemy, I have to build my capacity to not "claim" a preference. I've also learned it's easier to hold this tension when I don't have to do it alone.

> Lead me not to this or that.
> Lead me to the betweenness of things where numbers fail to make sense.
> Where and when One is neither complete without its Other nor the Other complete without its One.
> Help me find a strange grace in the risky voyage at the edge of everything I know to be true. — Bayo Akomolafe, Esu's Prayer, or A Prayer at the End of Time[2]

***

I have worked for years to shift the narrative frames[3] that surround global development—away from charity and saviorism and away from the violence of assuming "we" know what's right for someone else "over there." After talking about the need for responsiveness to local communities[4] in our sector for a couple of decades, I deeply wanted to be "local" somewhere myself again and I uprooted my life in 2021. . . but this time headed for home, Nebraska that is.

I thought I had left home for good at age 21. Leaving then was not so much for me a matter of "exploring the world" or of "making my mark" but for the purposes of survival. I needed to be as far away as possible from the abuse in my family of origin. Since then, Nebraska had become a place I held in contempt as much as I romanticized it. As much as I have changed, home had changed too.

So, I loaded all my worldly possessions into a truck and rode the waves of emotions as I responded to this call to home. I was—sometimes simultaneously—excited, triumphant, daunted, sad, terrified, overwhelmed, peaceful. It made me more conscious of all the ways that I have been taught to resist change growing up on the

Great Plains. It made me more conscious of the waves of emotions that used to accompany me as I traveled across borders for work in the international aid sector.

The origins of the "do-gooder" industry were formed for people like me in rich countries to respond to crises in which they were not directly impacted. (Though later I would learn, we were certainly implicated.) Now amidst a pained earth, warring authoritarian states, and global pandemics, people in rich countries are undeniably part of these crises, not just responders to them.

Five years later after re-establishing myself as a "local," I can share that home offers proximity to family (both healthy and unhealthy ties), a shared culture and a sense of belonging (even if I judge people's worldviews[5] as outdated), a lower cost of living, more space and ease of movement, and a renewed promise of possibility. Most importantly, I believe home has more lessons to teach me, particularly about navigating change, no longer as a sidekick but as a direct stakeholder.

There is a great rebalancing afoot in our world, and these times continually ask me to move towards everything that home offers, even if it is a mutual aid meeting I don't return to. What's clear for me right now is that our planet's survival[6] is dependent on seeing the places[7] we live—and that we don't—as home.

No one can expect to change the world alone. What we can do is operate with more humility in our own spheres of influence first. To keep building the world anew within my immediate community is my most realistic step as a sidekick now. I must do everything in my power to not let fallen heroes or false AI gods define my desires or expectations, and I can reject the false binaries imposed on us by those in power, including rich country or poor country, developed or underdeveloped, giver or receiver.

Not only must we not choose sides, we must agree that they do not even exist. The individual is the collective, and vice versa. The

interpersonal is the institutional, and vice versa. Over the next decade and beyond, let us sidekicks never lose sight of this.

Amidst so much brokenness, the old paradigms just don't hold. As we abandon notions of self-declared or societally-recognized heroes or sidekicks, as we abandon the search for the silver bullet, what do we hold on to?

Ten years later, we are still learning. But we can again be clear about what we are rejecting in our endeavors to help other humans around the world or in our neighborhood:

Not by might
Not by power
Not by fear
Not by control
Not by reacting
Not by lies
Not by winning first place
Not by domination
Not by manipulation
Not by superiority
Not by force
Not by hostility
Not by rigidity
Not by being right
Not by blaming
Not by panic
Not by punishment
Not by shame
Not by coercion
Not by dogma
Not by performance
Not by judgment
Not by saving
Not by fixing

Not by faking
Not by helplessness
Not by ignoring
Not by excluding
Not by assumption
Not by imposition
Not by accumulation
Not by transaction

Ten years later, we have learned we can do more:

By alignment
By attentiveness
By inquiry
By curiosity
By expansion
By devotion
By sharing
By listening
By responsiveness
By togetherness
By pausing
By balancing
By consistency
By generosity
By honoring
By wholeness
By possibility
By questioning
By trying
By options
By purpose
By evolving
By mourning
By reckoning

By releasing
By repair
By nourishing
By examining
By learning
By integration
By patience
By steadfastness
By invitation
By trust
By practice,
by practice,
by practice.

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Preamble #1

Economic Development is . . .

- A complex and costly process of collective action. Community members with varied backgrounds, preferences, and capabilities must organize and transform themselves into a singular and powerful voice of change.
- A historically anchored process. The set of choices, strategies, and policies from which a community can choose to proceed is a function of past decisions.
- A political process. Local, regional, and national politicians and power brokers must be held accountable if they are unresponsive to the interests of their communities.
- A long-term process. It is a struggle that takes decades, not years.
- A culturally sensitive process. Successful structural reforms in one community are not easily transplanted to another community.

Sustaining Economic Development, Ten Years Later

by *Laura Meinzen-Dick*

When the *Sidekick Manifesto* was first written, the statistic that nearly 1 in 10 people lived on less than $2 a day—and the popularity of one-for-one products, mission trips, and similar responses meant to address it—shaped how many of us thought about ending poverty. A decade later, that basic fact continues to shock as much as it did in 2016. There has been some progress in the last decade, although not nearly enough: the World Bank reports that the global poverty rate has fallen from 12.6% in 2016 to 10.3% today.[1]

Taking a longer perspective, 2016 was a hopeful time: poverty had been dramatically declining worldwide within a generation, and it seemed possible that the remarkable near-ending of poverty in East and South Asia could be repeated in Sub-Saharan Africa. Sadly, poverty rates have more or less stagnated in the years since. So, what have we learned about the process of economic development in the past ten years?

The RCT Revolution

The Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019 went to Abhijit Banerjee, Esther Duflo, and Michael Kremer "for their experimental

approach to alleviating global poverty." Their research (and that of many others) takes a practical look at what works: our efforts to end poverty shouldn't focus on what feels good; instead, we need cold, hard evidence that they improve people's lives in tangible ways.

Resources are scarce, so we should use them in ways they will have the biggest possible impact. To figure out what works, these scholars borrowed a method from the biomedical sciences: the Randomized Controlled Trial (RCT). When done correctly, an RCT allows us to accurately measure the causal impact of a project or program. What is the benefit of providing antimalarial bed nets, or providing electricity to households, or connecting farmers to markets?

The global aid community embraced this approach wholeheartedly. The "RCT revolution" is a solutions-oriented movement that holds the promise of scientifically discovering "the answer" to global development. There's an allure in that promise that was taken to an extreme by the effective altruism movement (who often relied on evidence from RCTs to determine where their money could do "the most good"). Even if we don't take it that far, this emphasis on reliable quantitative evidence effectively pushed back on the feel-good types of actions that the *Sidekick Manifesto* was responding to; it was easy to show that one-for-one products didn't do much of anything in ending poverty.[2]

At the same time, the RCT revolution could lose sight of two central tenets of the *Sidekick Manifesto*. First, it sometimes ignored the historical, political, long-term, and culturally sensitive nature of economic development: if we find a solution that works, we should spread it to as many places as possible, the thinking went. As RCTs exploded, however, it became clear that the context was fundamental, and scholars started to pay more attention to all the nuances of where they were working. Some of my own academic work falls into this category: why does titling land unlock investment in some places, and not others?

Second, and more insidiously, the RCT revolution could make Western scholars or experts the hero in ending poverty (perhaps why it was so appealing to some effective altruists). The people who are on the ground, doing the fiendishly complex work of organizing together to solve their problems became "subjects" of studies, responding to external stimuli, rather than agents shaping their own lives.

Context Matters

The Nobel committee in 2024 then went to Daron Acemoglu, Simon Johnson, and James Robinson "for studies of how institutions are formed and affect prosperity"—precisely the context that RCTs sometimes ignore. Indeed, the fingerprints of these scholars are all over the preface to the *Sidekick Manifesto* (as are those of Douglass North, Ronald Coase, and Elinor Ostrom, their intellectual forebears), and their work shaped our thinking about the historical, political, and cultural processes that we call development. It's exciting to see this work that was so fundamental to the way we think as economists recognized. It's also indicative of a positive trend in development economics: the joining of rigorous evidence bases with a greater attention to context, both in understanding how institutions work and how they can be changed, and in how they might mediate the impacts of an intervention.

The End of Aid?

When we first started talking about this tenth anniversary reimagining of the *Sidekick Manifesto*, I would probably have ended on that bright note. The pendulum of scholarly work on economic development was in an exciting place that brought together two principles that I hold dear. Unfortunately, with the dismantling of USAID in July 2025 and the broader cuts to international aid and development funding worldwide, I can no longer feel so optimistic. What will development look like going forward?

Most importantly, it will likely be slower. International funding, for all its flaws, did fund investments into health, education, and agriculture that were making meaningful differences in people's lives. Even if those programs begin again, there will be children who never re-enroll in school, crops that fail, and people who die as a result. By necessity, development will also be more locally driven. Just because donors stop sending money does not mean that people around the world will stop working to make their own lives better, in the ways they know best and that matter most to them. Perhaps when American foreign aid (hopefully) restarts, we can learn from this time and center the real heroes in poverty's end, in our narratives and our actions.

The Decision

KEEP the preamble.

The conceptualization of what economic development is was prophetic, and the field has only caught up to the Manifesto's original framing. The ineffectual alternatives have changed somewhat, but there continue to be so many narratives that make donors out to be the heroes in the story of ending poverty.

Questions for Reflection

- How does evidence-based development risk reproducing a hero narrative?
- What might it look like for a researcher to see themselves as the sidekick?

Additional Readings

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Preamble #2

Local leaders with local solutions to local problems will end poverty. We will not. We are only visitors:

- who do not share their culture
- who do not share their history
- who do not pay their taxes
- who do not vote in their elections
- who are only engaged for a short duration of time
- who have never ended our own poverty

Local Leadership and the Politics of Solidarity

by *Santiago Sueiro*

This preamble from the original *Sidekick Manifesto* captures an important truth about development and social change: people who live in a community understand their challenges better than outsiders. They carry the history, culture, and experiences that can shape solutions for the better. Outsiders, especially those who arrive for short periods of time with good intentions, often lack that context.

I learned of the Manifesto and this preamble when it was first developed. I took it to heart during my time working for the La Ceiba Microfinance Institution in Honduras. Over the years, however, I realized that political and economic change requires something more nuanced than simply local leaders. And I began to wonder what role "local leadership" should play in solving political and economic problems.

Local leadership matters, but it does not operate in isolation. The world rarely presents a clean choice between local solutions and outside involvement. Instead, societies constantly navigate a tension between local autonomy and centralized authority, between community voice and broader coordination. Sometimes local control produces better outcomes. Sometimes it creates barriers to solving problems that require scale, technical expertise, or regional

cooperation. Understanding that tension is critical if we want to think seriously about poverty, development, and political change.

The Limits of Localism

I am from the United States and work on U.S. economic policy. I notice that Americans often celebrate local control as a democratic ideal. Local governments regulate schools, land use, infrastructure, and many other aspects of everyday life. In theory, this allows communities to shape policy according to their own needs and preferences. In practice, however, local control can also create obstacles to solving collective problems.

Housing offers one example. Across the U.S., local governments control zoning laws and building approvals. These regulations give communities significant power over whether new housing can be built, and residents often use that power to block new construction.[1] Working-class people are particularly affected by these policies. When communities block new housing, rents and home prices rise, and working-class people end up moving farther away from jobs or leaving regions entirely. Economists increasingly point to local zoning restrictions as a major driver of America's housing shortage and affordability crisis.[2]

Other countries approach the problem differently. For example, Japan uses a national zoning framework that limits the ability of local governments to restrict housing construction.[3] The system still allows local input, but national rules ensure that housing development can proceed at scale. As a result, Japan has managed to keep housing prices relatively stable even in major metropolitan areas like Tokyo.

The contrast highlights a difficult reality: local decision-making does not always produce outcomes that benefit the broader public. Sometimes solving a problem requires shifting authority to regional or national institutions capable of coordinating action at scale.

Lessons from American History

American history offers an example of this tension that ultimately produced positive outcomes. During the New Deal era, policymakers experimented with new forms of public investment to address the economic collapse of the Great Depression. One of the most ambitious initiatives was the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), a federally owned corporation created in 1933 to bring electricity, flood control, and economic development to a large region of the American South which was suffering from lack of access to electricity and high poverty rates.[4]

The TVA did not emerge purely from local leadership. It combined national resources, technical expertise, and regional planning with community engagement. Engineers and scientists designed dams and power systems that could integrate into a broader electrical grid. Federal funding made the infrastructure possible. And the program engaged local communities and workers whose lives would be directly affected by these projects.

The project was not without its challenges. Critics pointed out that some communities bore significant costs, including displacement from land that was flooded by reservoirs. Yet the TVA illustrates how large-scale economic transformation often requires coordination beyond the local level. The project ended up bringing affordable and reliable electricity to millions of people, created tens of thousands of jobs, and provided critical infrastructure for the region to attract new industries and investments.

Lessons from Honduras

Questions of local power versus national coordination were complicated when I lived and worked in Honduras. During my time there, I saw firsthand how difficult it was for the government, both local and national, to deliver basic services. Many communities

struggled with unreliable water systems, limited healthcare access, underfunded schools, and persistent insecurity. The corruption in Honduras was illustrated in 2015 when millions of dollars were embezzled from the country's social security program to fund then President Juan Orlando's political party.[5]

In that context, the idea that "local leaders with local solutions" would naturally produce better outcomes felt less certain. Community leaders faced enormous constraints, including weak state capacity and limited financial resources.

On the other hand, Honduras's own history complicates the idea that outside intervention can help. Foreign influence, especially that of the U.S., played a significant role in creating the country's political and economic conditions. American fruit companies dominated the Honduran economy in the early twentieth century, controlling land, infrastructure, and export markets.[6] These entities often pursued their interests at the expense of Honduran democratic development. Their influence strengthened foreign elites while doing little to build public systems such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure that improve life for working people.

This history leaves outsiders in a difficult position. On one hand, local institutions struggle with serious limitations. On the other hand, foreign intervention frequently reinforced the very problems it claimed to solve. If both outside intervention and weak local governance contribute to dysfunction, where should change come from?

Beyond "Leaders" and Towards a Collective Movement

One answer may lie in rethinking the emphasis on leadership itself. The *Sidekick Manifesto* calls attention to the importance of local leaders because outsiders should not assume the role of heroes. Yet many of the most transformative social changes in history did not

begin with leaders. They emerged from collective movements of ordinary people.

The New Deal itself grew out of intense pressure from organized workers, farmers, and social movements during the Great Depression.[7] The Civil Rights Movement achieved landmark victories only after years of grassroots organizing, mass protest, and sustained collective action.[8]

Honduras has its own history of collective movements. In 1954, workers in the country's banana plantations launched a massive general strike that spread across the northern coast.[9] Tens of thousands of workers participated, forcing both the Honduran government and U.S. fruit companies to negotiate. The strike led to labor reforms, including recognition of unions and improvements in working conditions. This movement emerged from workers organizing together across communities, industries, and regions. Their collective action reshaped the country's labor laws and improved conditions for millions of people.

These examples suggest that the most powerful force for change may not be leadership alone but *solidarity*, or rather, the ability of people to recognize shared interests and act together to pursue them.

Solidarity as an Organizing Principle

It is common for foreign volunteers, non-governmental organizations, and international institutions to partner with local leaders to implement development projects meant to achieve positive change. They look for charismatic individuals who can champion projects or represent communities. That approach sometimes works, but it can also narrow our understanding of how change happens.

Solidarity, on the other hand, shifts the focus from individuals to relationships. Communities organize when people recognize that their struggles connect with the struggles of others. Workers join across workplaces. Experts, activists, and public officials collaborate across national borders. In this sense, solidarity does not eliminate the importance of local knowledge or community voice. Instead, it places those principles within a broader network of cooperation.

The key question is not who leads, but how people work together and whether those relationships respect the agency and priorities of the communities most affected by poverty and inequality. For outsiders, this perspective demands humility. We cannot assume that we know what a community needs. We cannot assume that our expertise entitles us to lead. But neither should we assume that the only legitimate role is complete withdrawal.

Sometimes solidarity means supporting movements that already exist or sharing knowledge or technical expertise. And sometimes it means advocating for changes in our own governments whose policies shape conditions abroad.

The *Sidekick Manifesto* reminds us that outsiders should not play the hero in the story of poverty's end. However, the idea that local leaders alone will end poverty may be too simple for a world shaped by complex political and economic systems. Change often emerges from many forces acting together. Local organizing, national policy, technical expertise, and international cooperation are all needed to create positive change.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the preamble.

Center solidarity as the organizing principle towards collective action.

Shared liberation and a more just society are built through collective action and solidarity. We have the power to make meaningful change when ordinary people recognize their shared humanity, organize together, and act in the spirit of cooperation and mutual support.

Questions for Reflection

The question for the Manifesto is not whether change should be local or external, centralized or decentralized, leader-driven or grassroots. But rather:

- What forms of solidarity can allow people to build the institutions, movements, and systems they need to shape their own future?

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Preamble #3

In the story of poverty's end, we cannot be heroes.

We are Sidekicks.

Rethinking the Sidekick: Power, Agency, and Solidarity

by *Gunjan Veda*

As a brown woman from the Majority World, I have a visceral reaction to the word "sidekick." For most of my life I have been made to feel like one—first because of my age, then gender, and finally because of the country I was born in. And yet, I have had much more privilege than many women from the Majority World.

Growing up, I saw women being sidelined in every aspect of their lives. I watched remarkable people being treated as sidekicks because of their religion, race, or language. In the professional arena, I witnessed people from the Majority World being cast as extras and, more recently, as token participants to make an event appear inclusive. I have seen powerful voices being ignored or silenced. I have seen self-esteem shrivel, ideas die, and courage collapse. I have seen friends—not all of them women or from the Majority World—enroll in course after course because somewhere deep down they believed they are not enough. I am guilty of doing the same. So, when I hear the word sidekick, I ask myself, does anyone deserve to feel "less than" as the definition of a sidekick implies? Is the hierarchy between a hero and sidekick truly necessary?

Words Matter

Before I continue, let me define a few terms, because language matters. Words shape how we see ourselves and our place in the world. They influence how others see us. First, Majority World. Many of us are perhaps more familiar with terms like Global South, underdeveloped, developing, low- and middle-income countries. Each term is factually incorrect and designed to make us—people from a certain part of the world—feel as if we are less than.

In the 1990s, Bangladeshi photographer Shahidul Alam coined the term "Majority World" to remind us that, if we truly believe in the power of democracy, why is it that the minority of the world's population is making decisions for the majority.

I work with the Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD), a group of over 3,000 local and community-based organizations from the Majority World and their 35 allies from the Minority World (meet term number two). We use the term Majority World for another reason—to remind ourselves that we are the majority of the world's population and we have the power to transform this world. We have agency. We are our own protagonists—heroes or heroines.

The question is, do we need a sidekick to feel like protagonists? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a hero as "a person who is admired or idealized for courage, outstanding achievements, or noble qualities." In contrast, a sidekick is "a person closely associated with another as a subordinate or partner." Notice the implicit hierarchy in this relationship. It is this hierarchy, this normalization of power asymmetry, that troubles me.

2016: The Beginning of #ShiftThePower

Don't get me wrong. I appreciate the sentiment behind the Manifesto—the need to fight the white saviorism that has pervaded

every aspect of our lives, including the development sector. I applaud the self-reflection that it demands of us, especially of those who come from a place of privilege. For too long stories have been stolen, people have been objectified, and their knowledge rejected or appropriated in the name of doing good. Well-intentioned programs have eroded the agency of women, men, youth, children, the elderly. That needs to stop.

In 2016, when the *Sidekick Manifesto* was created, many in the development and humanitarian spaces were beginning to question the coloniality embedded in these sectors. It was the year of the Grand Bargain and the emergence of the #ShiftThePower movement. Just a year before, MCLD had been launched to center communities. Local actors from the Majority World who were closest to the people but had long been starved of funding, visibility, and influence, had begun to demand greater resources, greater power. Individuals and organizations in the Minority World began to stand by them; coalitions like RINGO (Reimagining the INGO) and Pledge for Change emerged. USAID threw its hat into the arena with a renewed commitment to putting communities in the driver's seat. We were officially in the decade of "localization."

Yet localization became a tool for normalizing unjust, neo-colonial power structures. It imbued the existing developmental and humanitarian system with an aura of invincibility. The system could not be changed; but with localization it could be made less unjust.

The goalpost had shifted, not power.

When it was coined in 2016, #ShiftThePower was an idea ahead of its time. Many of us, across the Majority and Minority World, embraced it wholeheartedly as we sought to address the inherent power asymmetry in our work and world.

2026: From #ShiftThePower to #ThePowerOfUs

In 2023, I was invited to give a lightning talk at an event on "localization." After 2-plus hours of speeches, I became the first Majority World speaker at the event. I had five minutes. Less than 30% of the participants were from the Majority World, even fewer from local organizations. I was furious. After my talk, most people congratulated me "for speaking truth to power." Well-intentioned as the comments were, they completely ignored and invisibilized my power—the power I had exercised by forcing funders to self-reflect.

This is the inherent flaw in the idea of shifting power. It assumes two sets of actors: one that has power and another that does not. For justice and equity to prevail we need to shift power from the haves to the have-nots. Not only does this fail to recognize the power within each of us—what we call agency—it reinforces the duality that defines much of Western thought. It turns development into a zero-sum game and power into a "scarce commodity" whose redistribution needs to be coaxed or coerced.

And yet, as Amartya Sen reminded us, "Development is Freedom," and its achievement "is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of people."[1] What if we traded the asymmetric agency of the sidekick-hero analogy for the relational power of Ubuntu?

A Radical Solidarity Grounded in Mutuality, Shared Learning, and Collective Power

Ubuntu scholars like Mogobe Ramose, Michael Onyebuchi Eze, and Augustine Shutte explain that in the African worldview everything, including humans, are "living centres of vital force," interlocked with one another.[2] Human existence is fundamentally relational and becomes real through mutual recognition and participation in community.[3]

Moving from the binary worldview to this relational one suggests that we can all power one another, without diminishing our own force. Power is no longer a finite commodity to be rationed, but something that emerges through relationships with our surroundings and the people within them, expanding the shared field of human possibility.

Decolonization need not be understood solely as a disruptive act that dismantles dominant systems of being, thinking, and doing, but also as a process of constructive transformation grounded in relational ethics and mutual empowerment.[4] Social transformation is achieved through shared agency, not paternalistic aid or symbolic role reversals. In this view, we resemble trees in an interconnected forest, making each other stronger, more confident in our individual agency and collective possibility.

In the decade since the release of the *Sidekick Manifesto*, much has changed. The aid architecture that was thought to be invincible is crumbling around us. Multilateralism, flawed as it was, is floundering. Wars (in plural) are underway, with no sign of abatement.

Power is a much-maligned term. But as someone who has always had to fight to exercise her own power, I wonder if power deserves the reputation it enjoys. Without power, how would we thrive? How would we transform our world? How would we protest a war, stop a genocide, address climate disasters, continue to safeguard hard-won freedoms, and fight shrinking civic space?

Maybe the problem is not power itself but the way it is exercised. What if power was exercised collectively—not over others but with them—would it still be a bad thing?

Think of the human body. Every organ has a distinct function; each is necessary for good health and well-being. But if the kidneys, pancreas, liver, and intestines all decided to do what the heart did because everyone only talked about the heart, we would end up in

the hospital. That has been the challenge of our sector. We have all wanted to become the heart. The remedy is not to stop producing bile, filtering blood, removing toxins, releasing enzymes, or absorbing nutrients. It is to do our part and do it well.

Keeping our dream of a just, equitable, peaceful, and sustainable planet alive requires each one of us and our collective power. It requires a radical solidarity that is grounded in "mutuality, accountability, and the recognition of common interests as the basis for relationships among diverse communities."[5]

The Decision

DISCARD the preamble.

What if life was not a straight line where you had to put the first last in order for the last to be first? What if it was a circle where we could all stand together in solidarity, equal in dignity but honoring the proximity of the person directly facing the challenge?

Latin American decolonial thought speaks of "a world where many worlds fit"[6] and a world system built from many cultural perspectives interacting with one another.[7]

I therefore propose we change the preamble to read the following:

In the story of poverty's end, we are all protagonists. We stand in radical solidarity recognizing the power and contribution of each, supporting one another, and knowing that a better world will take all of us. We promise to participate and to share the risks that come with solidarity.

And I strongly recommend that we call this revised preamble and vision, *The Solidarity Manifesto,* not the *Sidekick Manifesto.*

Questions for Reflection

- Am I doing the work that I am best suited for or the work that is the most visible/most funded?
- How can I use my power to expand the power of others? How have I determined this? Have I asked? Have I listened?
- Am I prepared to share the risks that emerge from standing in solidarity or do I expect others to bear them?

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Promise #1

I Will Ride in the Sidecar

I will listen to how those already doing the difficult work of building a better future for themselves, their families, and their communities define and determine how to end poverty.

Riding in the Sidecar

by *Amy Gaman*

When the Boko Haram insurgency tore through Northeast Nigeria, it didn't just take lives. It took futures. I lost friends and family members. My sisters fled as refugees to Cameroon. And the dream I had carried for years, of being a medical doctor, ended because school and safety no longer existed in the way they needed to.

In the middle of that grief, I caught myself thinking: if my family had more resources, maybe none of this would have touched us. Maybe I would have been studying in the United Kingdom or the United States, or at a private university in Nigeria, protected from the violence that was swallowing communities.

And yet, as hard as those years were, my family was not "poor" in the way many around us were. We had food, clothes, education, and choices. That contrast changed how I understood poverty. Poverty isn't only about not having money. It's also about being exposed, without buffers, when the world becomes unsafe.

Where Conflict Meets Poverty

Conflict and poverty feed each other. In some communities where I've worked, young people were pressured or coerced into joining

armed groups not because they believed in an ideology, but because they were trapped by debts as small as $20 borrowed for farming.

When you're desperate, every "offer" starts to look like a way out.

This is why the poverty-conflict nexus matters so much in Northeast Nigeria. When livelihoods collapse, recruitment becomes easier. When violence spreads, farms are abandoned, markets close, and children miss years of school. The cycle tightens.

Research on conflict and poverty notes how political violence can deepen poverty through long-term damage to human capital and expectations, and how weak state capacity can link economic fragility and conflict.

A regional study by UNDP[1], based on interviews with recruits and former recruits across African countries, also found that economic pressures and shocks can be a tipping point for recruitment into violent extremist groups.

That matches what I've seen: many people don't "choose" conflict so much as they run out of alternatives.

From Volunteer to "Sidekick"

I didn't enter this work with a manifesto in my hand. I entered because I needed a way to serve my community without stripping people of dignity in the process.

I started volunteering with humanitarian and development organizations, supporting people living in displacement camps and camp-like settlements. Later, I worked with young women who escaped from abduction by Boko Haram—the Chibok Girls—and were trying to rebuild their lives after the 2014 abduction that sparked the global #BringBackOurGirls[2] campaign. I supported 24 girls at the time; eight have since graduated from university and are

doing well in fields like accounting, human resources, and environmental sciences, among others.

This is where cultural competence and lived experience became more than a buzzword for me. I earned trust because I understood the language, the context, and what it means to dream and have that dream stolen. When someone has lost so much, dignity can't be an afterthought. It must be the starting point.

Leaving the Hero Story

In the international development sector, people often encourage a certain kind of narrative: the hero's journey. My own story fits that structure easily. A young woman with ambitions is derailed by violence, faces an identity crisis, and emerges with a new purpose. That narrative is true. It's also useful in a system that rewards dramatic personal stories and "impact" headlines.

But as I've grown in leadership, I've become more conscious of the hero story, especially when it places me at the center of work that belongs to communities.

Other people have cast me in roles I didn't choose: Nigerian, female, from a minority tribe in the Northeast, Christian, wife, mentor, mother, "survivor turned leader." Some of these identities hold beauty and strength. Some come with assumptions I constantly must push against. But none of them give me the right to take the driver's seat in someone else's life.

That's why the *Sidekick Manifesto* promises: "I will ride in the sidecar. I will not lead. I will listen as the communities are already doing the difficult work . . . define and determine how to end poverty" landed in my spirit as more than a nice metaphor. It named the discipline I was trying to learn: to step back without stepping away.

What Localization Looks Like on the Ground

This is also why I joined Nuru Nigeria as part of the Nuru Collective. Our work focuses on fighting extreme poverty through nutrition-sensitive regenerative agribusiness development that is community-led, community-driven, and community-sustained.

The communities we partner with often live with multiple layers of hardship: conflict, climate shocks, unstable policy environments, and the economic disruptions that followed COVID-19. In these contexts, "poverty" is not one problem. It's a condition that shapes everyday decisions: what to plant, whether to migrate, whether to keep a daughter in school, whether to take a risky loan, whether to trust a stranger who promises protection.

Localization is sometimes presented as a technical shift: move more resources to local actors, increase local decision-making, improve accountability. But on the ground, it's also emotional and relational. It means resisting the urge to arrive with answers. It means believing that communities are not empty containers waiting for solutions. Like an African proverb states, "you cannot shave a person's head in his/her absence," so we can't design programs without the people who will be impacted by the projects.

Humanitarian actors increasingly use "localization" to name this shift toward empowering local responders and recognizing local leadership. For me, localization[3] is simply what the sidecar requires: communities drive; we support; we stay accountable.

At Nuru Nigeria, farmers, cooperative groups, and communities, especially women and youth, lead the way. They identify priorities. They manage resources. They make trade-offs. Our role is to walk alongside: to strengthen farmer organizations and community institutions so progress can continue long after external support ends.

When people collaborate toward shared goals, trust grows. Relationships deepen. Communities become more resilient to future shocks. That resilience isn't abstract. It's the difference between being forced into displacement or being able to stay. It's the difference between a young person taking a loan from an unknown source at the risk of being recruited or having a decent livelihood in the green economy.

What Changed Since 2016

The promise to "ride in the sidecar" was written in 2016 when the world convened in Istanbul and agreed to allocate 25% of global humanitarian and development funding to local actors, but the past decade has made its stakes clearer.

Conflict has become more complex. In Nigeria and across the region, violence is no longer only insurgency; it includes banditry, farmer-herder tensions, kidnapping economies, and political instability. Climate impacts also multiply stress in already-fragile communities.

And the global aid ecosystem is under pressure: shrinking budgets, short funding cycles, and performance metrics that can reward speed over trust.

In this context, riding in the sidecar is harder than it sounds. It can feel slow. It can require more patience than a donor timeline allows. It can mean sitting with discomfort when community priorities don't match what outsiders expected.

But it's also the only way I know to do this work with integrity. The alternative is "help" that quietly recenters power; help that makes communities dependent, or invisible, or grateful for things they should have had the right to shape in the first place. It is also the difference between resilience and relapse, between sustainable

development and continuous investment that doesn't translate to long-term change.

To be sure, localization doesn't mean that international actors should be sidelined in development work; it only means development/aid work should be done in a sustainable manner and the only way I know we will achieve long-term sustainability is when communities are involved, engaged, and empowered to own the process according to their aspirations.

The Decision

KEEP the promise.

And sharpen how I live it.

"Riding in the sidecar" is not passive. It is a commitment to power-sharing, humility, and accountability. In 2026 and beyond, I will treat listening as an action, and I will measure my leadership by how much ownership communities hold, not how visible I am.

Questions for Reflection

- When have I told a "hero story" about my work? Does that quietly make other people's agency disappear?
- What do I do when community priorities differ from what I think is most urgent?
- What would it look like to treat listening as a form of responsibility?
- How do I build accountability downward (to communities), not only upward (to donors and institutions)?

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Promise #2

I Will Ignore Sirens Singing Songs of Scale

Building dignified relationships is a mutual process of learning about and from one another. This takes patience, humility, and authenticity—these things cannot be rushed or easily scaled.

Moving at the Speed of Trust

by *Grace Boone*

The siren song of scalability is an enticing and alluring one. It seems to call out to us amidst desperate moments or within inspiring ideas. It finds us when the world's problems seem solvable through a universally good idea. And yet, the closer we move toward the siren's call, the more we realize that it's an illusion—scalability, as is traditionally approached, is an illusion.

While funders are often looking for a "project" that can be scaled across regions and even countries, communities remind us that each place and group is situated in a unique context, with their own history, navigating their own dynamics. This is even starker considering the incredibly complex times communities are living through. As Paula Gil Baizan wisely says, "We've inherited a mindset where progress is something you scale…but the crises we face are not discrete problems. They are patterns.… Climate shocks now trigger economic instability, displacement, misinformation, and governance failures—often all at once. The system doesn't break in one place. It warps everywhere."[1] In this way, how we think about scaling in its linear nature—for example, franchising a coffee shop—no longer works for complex social problems in our current realities. We need relational scaling—like a mycelium network expanding far and wide while staying connected and sustained.

In their report "Pathways to Scale from the Deep,"[2] The Systems Sanctuary emphasizes the mindset shift of scale from growth to depth—providing helpful models to achieve "scale" in these complex times. The caution then is not on the idea of scalability itself, when it's done in a relational, intentional, and systems-forward way, but rather the assumptions, like the belief that what works in one place will work everywhere, we might make amidst the allure of the siren's call.

While "big money" seems to still be in grants and projects that promise scalability, there are remarkable funders, movements, and partners that show us another way is not only possible—it's here. And it's locally rooted and globally connected. Take the Global Fund for Community Foundations (GFCF)[3] for example. GFCF has partners all over the world that are funding community-based efforts by and for the community. The Movement for Community-led Development (MCLD)[4] is another beacon. MCLD's network in 25+ countries organizes hyper-locally to support their community's needs and hopes while staying connected to learn from and be in solidarity with one another across the globe. These exemplary efforts prove the effectiveness of rooted solidarity and true partnership.

Listening to the Quieter Calls of Dignified and Mutual Relationships

The siren song of scalability is not only alluring; it's also distracting. While searching for the "perfect" scalable solution to a widespread issue, we might miss the true calls of people close to their communities who are offering ideas or raising red flags. We might move quickly because we believe that our good intentions will save the world. We don't hear the quieter—but equally strong—calls of dignified and mutual relationships that invite us to move slowly and intentionally. It's in this, our relationships, to ourselves and the communities we're working with, that we must learn to listen and to

trust. Going slower often helps us go farther, as there's nothing more effective than "moving at the speed of trust,"[5] as adrienne maree brown says.

It's here that I want to invite you to take this moment to do what so many of us rarely do—pause. Take a deep breath and imagine someone who you are in a good relationship with—this could be a family member, someone you work with who you appreciate, or a member of your community that fills you with joy when you cross paths. What is it about this relationship that feels good to you? How does your body and nervous system feel around them? What has allowed this relationship to evolve from a stranger to a trusted person? What does this relationship open up for you as you move through the world?

My hope is that the more we each can identify what a good relationship feels like, the more we will be able to move toward those types of relationships in our lives and work. For me, good relationships are often difficult to describe—my body relaxes in a way it so rarely does out in the world, I can be my vulnerable, at times, awkward, self without fear of rejection, and I enjoy spending time together, whether it's going on an adventure or talking over a coffee. In short, I feel like I belong. And I rely on this feeling, because I truly believe that when we're in right relationship, we feel it.

Building trusting and mutual relationships, especially with people from different places, histories, and experiences than us, takes time, intentionality, and openness that the alluring and distracting siren songs of scale don't allow for. Being led by relationships means that we must flip the typical ways that we work—we must let the relationships lead the work we do, and not the other way around.

Change the Tune, Together

Being led by relationships is so much easier said than done, especially when our livelihoods are dependent on our ability to access funding—and funding is typically dedicated to "scalable ideas." But the good news is that not only do we each have the ability to work toward changing the traditions we find ourselves in, we can also leverage strong relationships to take collective action together.

Each of us has a sphere of influence[6] to shape more relational cultures. Whether it is as small as bringing in a connecting question[7] before jumping into the agenda, checking in with a colleague who seems to be having a bad day, or stating a courageous observation when something doesn't feel right at work, these small acts of relationality begin to shift the way individuals relate to each other and groups gather together. We often have a lot more power to shift dynamics than we think.

And yet, moving at the speed of trust may test your resolve. When I was managing a multi-year, consortium-based USAID project, Stopping As Success,[8] I was challenged on my commitment to being people-centered amidst important deadlines and juggling competing priorities when COVID-19 hit. Rooted in our strong relational foundation as a team, we worked with our donor to shift priorities based on what our partners needed in real time, especially considering we were working to support teams and institutions to actualize community-led development during a time of rapid, sector-wide change. We advocated for a slow pace with partners, prioritized near-constant learning and adaptation, and made sure to care for each other amidst a cataclysmic time. It's here that I experienced the tangible tension that exists between wanting to be people-centered while also competing with deadlines and bureaucratic demands—and it's here that I re-learned that the only

way to make effective change is by walking alongside people to make that change together.

True transformation often calls us to move in the liminal space—the space between the world we have and the world we want. We'll need to chart paths that haven't been walked before to outcomes that haven't been written into budgets. It is a level of courage, determination, and relationality that take practice and patience. So, as you navigate the murky waters of trying to make the world a more just and equitable place, I hope you remember to only go as quickly as trust will allow, be gentle with yourself and practice accountability when you get it wrong, and lean into the possibility of systems-level change that's scalable not in its linear growth but in its depth. May our relationships lead the way, reminding us, again and again, that the world we want is not only possible—it's here. And we're actively responsible for continuing to usher it into being.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

Focus on how strong and sustained relationships lead to lasting transformation.

I will ignore the siren songs of scale. Instead, I will listen for the quieter, but equally strong, calls of respectful, trust-filled, and mutual relationships. I will trust these relationships to lead the way, knowing that true transformation will require the type of vulnerability, courage, and determination that takes practice and patience.

Questions for Reflection

- When have I tried to scale something that worked really well? When did it not work so well?

- Where do I feel the pull towards traditional scalability? How might I shift to ensure it's deep and not linear?
- When have I successfully built a trusting and mutual relationship with someone? How might I continue to use that success story to be more relationally led?
- How can I make my daily/family/work life more relational? Where do I have the power to shift culture to let the relationships lead the way?
- What is the world that I want to be a part of? How do I continue to show up daily to see that world come into existence?

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Promise #3

I Will Question the Utility of My Utility Belt

Technology and gadgets are sometimes helpful, but they do not address the root causes of poverty. Poverty is about power and politics.

Whose Hands Are on the Design Table?

by *Mahrukh (Maya) Hasan*

In 2015, I sat in a conference room in Juba, South Sudan, convinced I knew what our journalist partners needed. As a design, monitoring, and evaluation manager with an international media development organization, I was developing a training curriculum with expert journalists and community radio station managers. We wanted to track journalist capacity over time, a reasonable goal. But here's where my assumptions kicked in: lower digital literacy meant we should keep it low-tech.

So, we built interactive PDFs. Manual tracking. No automation.

It failed spectacularly.

The system was so cumbersome that despite good intentions and genuine effort, it stopped being used. Not because the journalists weren't capable or committed, but because we, the international staff, had designed a tool that served our theory of what would work, not their reality of what actually would.

I am a designer. This kind of failure pains me deeply. But what pains me more is that I repeated this mistake elsewhere.

In Bangladesh, I evaluated a multilingual glossary app developed by a humanitarian language services organization for refugee response.

The concept was sound—helping interpreters and aid workers navigate technical jargon across languages. But even well-intentioned technology misses the mark when we skip critical steps in the design process. The tool was built first, then evaluated later. No co-design with the interpreters who would use it daily. No usability testing in the field.

These weren't technology failures. These were design process failures. And more fundamentally, they were power failures—failures to shift who gets to shape the tools that are supposed to serve them.

The Question Beneath the Question

The original *Sidekick Manifesto* promise was right: technology and gadgets don't address root causes of poverty. Poverty is fundamentally about power and politics—who makes decisions, who controls resources, and whose voice counts as credible expertise.

But here's what we're learning a decade later: technology isn't separate from power and politics. It's a reflection of them. Every tool we build and every platform we deploy takes the shape of its creators' unexamined assumptions and biases. The real question isn't whether to use technology.

It's whose hands are on the design table.

As the child of refugees and immigrants, a Pakistani-American woman who has spent most of her adult life in the Global South, I've occupied that complex in-between space—marginalized in some contexts, privileged in others. In South Sudan, I navigated the devastating bias where Black African colleagues' ideas were dismissed until repeated by White Western consultants. In Bangladesh, I witnessed organizations genuinely committed to

refugee empowerment while simultaneously perpetuating internal hierarchies based on passport color and educational pedigree.

This positionality has taught me something crucial: when we design without examining power, without co-creating with communities, and without understanding trauma, we perpetuate the very inequities we claim to fight. It doesn't matter how simple or sophisticated the gadget is if it embeds oppressive dynamics in its code.

The Stakes Have Changed

Since the *Sidekick Manifesto* was published in 2016, AI has proliferated, automation is everywhere, and nonprofits are facing a reckoning. The statistics tell a stark story: 92% of nonprofits feel unprepared for AI, yet 82% are already using it, and only 10% have formal policies governing its use.[1] Large organizations are adopting AI at twice the rate of smaller ones, widening the digital divide we should be closing.

Sitting out isn't neutral. If those of us with critical consciousness about power don't engage with technology, we abandon communities to be shaped by those who will—without the values-driven, trauma-informed, power-aware lens we bring. Remember the resistance to email? To the internet? Those who sat out lost influence over how these tools evolved and how they affected the communities we serve. We're at that crossroads again, except the stakes are higher and the pace is faster.

When Technology Knows Better

Chayn, a UK-based global nonprofit run by survivors and allies, demonstrates what critically engaged technology looks like. In 2020, they deployed therapy chatbots for survivors of gender-based violence. When they discovered the technology was causing harm,

they shut it down. No sunk cost fallacy. No doubling down. They listened, learned, and stopped.

What Chayn understood—and what my PDF fiasco missed—is that technology serving historically marginalized populations demands extra care. Trauma-informed design isn't optional. Co-creation isn't a nice-to-have.

But Chayn didn't abandon technology. They became more intentional about it. After the chatbot failure, they developed Bloom, a platform offering remote courses that merge the wisdom of survivors worldwide on trauma and gender-based violence with therapeutic practices. They created eight trauma-informed design principles foundational to everything they do—from HR processes to user research to product design. This time, the technology was built with survivors, not for them. This time, they got it right.

Full Circle: Digital Transformation Done Right

Five years after my South Sudan PDF disaster, I found myself working with the same team—now remotely, during COVID-19. The pandemic finally forced digital transformation, but this time we approached it differently. I was now a senior advisor, which shifted my role from implementer to guide. We introduced a collaborative digital ecosystem, and the team—with low digital literacy and deep skepticism—had to come with us.

What changed wasn't the technology. What changed was our process. We leaned into psychological safety and change management principles. We held group training calls and individual sessions for those uncomfortable with the transition. We met people where they were, acknowledged discomfort while helping them move through it, explained why it mattered, and gave them agency in how fast they moved.

Within three months, everyone wasn't just comfortable—they were thriving. Social capital increased as everyone could connect across geography and hierarchy. Knowledge access democratized. Trust deepened through transparent collaboration. The very power dynamics that had frustrated me in 2015 started shifting because the technology enabled different ways of relating.

Building a Better Utility Belt

As Karen Hao documents in *Empire of AI*, technology reflects the power dynamics of its creation.[2] Current AI development concentrates resources, extracts data and labor from marginalized communities, and scales at all costs. But as Timnit Gebru's work at the Distributed AI Research Institute demonstrates, another path exists: small, community-rooted tools built with rather than for the people they serve.[3] The choice isn't whether to use technology—it's whose questions shape what gets built.

Robin's utility belt was different from Batman's, and that's precisely the point. In 2026 and beyond, we need to build better utility belts—together. That means co-design is non-negotiable: lived experience is expertise, and who sits at the design table matters as much as what gets designed. It means technology as enabler, not solution—centering survivors and proximate leaders in both the narrative and the decision-making. And it means interrogating every tool for embedded power dynamics: who benefits, who's excluded, who decides.

This is what I'm putting into practice through Fearless, a global peer membership community for social impact leaders who are women of color. We're grappling with these exact tensions while simultaneously using multiple platforms to connect, learn, and build power together. We're not pretending technology is neutral. We're interrogating it constantly, making mistakes, and course-correcting.

What Monday Morning Looks Like

If you're feeling the urgency I feel, start here:

- This week: Audit one current technology initiative through a power lens. Who made decisions about this tool? Who was consulted versus who co-created? Whose assumptions are embedded in its design?
- This month: Identify one upcoming tech decision and commit to genuine co-creation—not token participation, but engagement where communities shape decisions and share power.
- This quarter: Develop or advocate for an organizational AI policy and invest in change management for any new technology adoption, because tools without training create frustration, not transformation.

Don't sit out. The communities we serve need our critical consciousness at the table where technology is being built.

The Designer's Imperative

I am a designer, which means I believe everything is designed and can be redesigned. Technology. Organizations. Partnerships. Power structures themselves.

The question isn't whether Robin should have tools. It's whether those tools support the mission and the people doing the actual work on the ground. We can freeze in fear of technology's power to harm. We can flee into resistance that feels principled but leaves communities without our voice in how tools evolve. Or we can engage—critically, collaboratively, courageously.
When we bring power awareness, trauma-informed practice, and co-creation principles to technology, we don't just build better tools.

We shift who holds power, who makes decisions, whose voice counts. That's the utility belt worth building.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

I will question who built my utility belt, and for whom. Technology reflects the power of its creators. Poverty is about power and politics—and technology is no different.

Questions for Reflection

- Think of a tool or platform your organization currently uses. Who was at the design table when it was built? Whose voices, needs, and lived experiences were centered—and whose were absent?
- The author argues that "sitting out isn't neutral." Do you agree? What are the costs of disengaging from AI and emerging technology—and for whom are those costs highest?
- Chayn shut down a chatbot when it caused harm, then rebuilt differently. Can you think of a time you (or your organization) should have stopped, learned, and restarted? What made that difficult?
- What does "co-design" actually require in your context—in terms of time, resources, and power-sharing? What would have to change for genuine co-creation to become the norm rather than the exception?
- The author describes herself as occupying a "complex in-between space"—marginalized in some contexts, privileged in others. How does your own positionality shape your relationship to technology, design decisions, and the communities you serve?

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Promise #4

I Will Be the Constant Understudy

A crucial reason that good intentions often fail is a lack of self-critique. I will always be listening, learning, and seeking a deeper understanding of my role in the story of poverty's end.

Time to Listen and Learn

by *Susan Davis*

The term "sidekick" originated in superhero narratives, while "understudy" is a theater term. When I first read this promise, I thought of how understudies typically wait backstage, hoping to eventually step into the spotlight and perform the lead role themselves. I considered other theatrical roles. Both "director" and "playwright" seemed too powerful; "audience member" too uninvolved. Then I considered the people behind the curtain: the set builders and costume designers. The show cannot go on without these unseen and unsung contributors.

Like a theater production, addressing global poverty requires a collaborative effort. However, unlike a play with its finite performances, the struggle against poverty doesn't have a limited run. The choices made in one nation can trap individuals in another, perpetuating a cycle of poverty that spans borders and generations. For example, low-income countries are stuck paying off debts to rich countries instead of investing in their own development.[1] Meanwhile, those same rich countries offer quick fixes to social problems, which deepens dependence. It's time to make better choices.

What Changed Since 2016

For decades, people who mean well—volunteers, civic organizations, religious entities, celebrities, United Nations organizations, corporate foundations—have approached large, complex problems with simplistic approaches. This has not ended poverty. When the original *Sidekick Manifesto* came out, one in ten people lived on less than $2 a day. Today, about half of the world's population lives on less than $7 a day.[2] Does that feel like progress? Despite millions of aid dollars and hours spent, we're losing the fight against extreme poverty, compounded by an existential climate crisis, mounting public debt, food insecurity, an unequal pandemic recovery, and geopolitical conflict.

But an opportunity to rethink opened up in 2025 as government aid agencies decreased funding. Even before the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was decimated, people like me (a White American woman) were having a hard time imagining a new—or no—role in solving global poverty. We have made our careers in this sector. If we hang up our capes, are we left naked?

Working Ourselves Out of a Job?

In 1995, when I first got involved in solving the global water and sanitation crisis, the estimated failure rates of water systems in developing countries ranged from 20% to 90%.[3] Thirty years later, despite my contributions (and those of many, many others), the proportion of the world's population lacking safe water is much the same. So are the failure rates of foreign-supported water systems. Few of us have fixed anything that we built, funded, or evaluated. "I tried," we say, "and isn't that enough?" Nope. Poor people are left poorer, demoralized, and often sicker by failed water projects. Communities are unfairly vilified for letting their water systems fail. Millions of dollars, thousands of broken handpumps, broken promises, and broken dreams.

It's frustrating that international development actors keep making the same mistakes that were documented and decried decades ago. The reason is a toxic mix of avoiding acknowledgement of failures, not taking time to learn from the past, and working in silos. Outsized egos, mismatched incentives, and misdirected accountability contribute as well. In *Who Owns Poverty*, Martin Burt reflects, "For all the hours and dollars being thrown at the problem of global poverty, it's hard to avoid the sneaking suspicion that we should have worked ourselves out of a job by now; that there's something standing in between us and total poverty elimination—and that part of the problem might be us." I am part of the problem.

The Power of Proximity

Among development professionals and academics, the latest buzzwords are "local ownership," "proximity," and "lived experience." I've seen firsthand how people closest to the problem are more likely to contribute to lasting improvements than outsiders. My first foray into development was with WaterPartners International, which raised money in the U.S. to send to water organizations led by people who lived in Bangladesh, Honduras, India, and the Philippines. These local partners, along with community members, built water systems that are still providing safe water 30 years later. WaterPartners' model is still rare. While thought pieces, calls to action, and panel discussions admit the hero is no longer the distant expert or foreign benefactor, only 10% of American funding for international development goes to proximate leaders.[4]

Looking back, I should have stayed with the WaterPartners approach, but I fell for the lure of a better salary with a big international charity and, later, more direct influence with a medium-sized water organization. I've come full circle. I'm now an advisor for Water1st International, which continues the

WaterPartners model. And I've joined the board of MAMA HOPE, which provides funds and organizational development for early-stage African-led organizations.

The Superpower of Listening

When I was a pre-teen, I loved watching *The Bionic Woman*. Jaime Sommers, a regular person saved from near death with sci-fi surgery that gave her bionic implants, was the first woman superhero on television. Unlike Wonder Woman and other female superheroes who followed, Jaime dressed in regular clothes. She could run fast, jump high, and, if she tucked her hair behind her ear, hear conversations from miles away. This last superpower resonated with me the most because my mother, who wore hearing aids, often couldn't hear when I asked her to go to the mall. However, mom's ears turned bionic when I muttered something mean about her decision.

Speaking of ears, *The Listening Project* shows both the possibility and the benefits of making time to listen to people on the receiving end of international aid. Thousands of people across 21 countries told listening groups, "International aid is a good thing, and we are grateful for it but…," followed by thoughtful critiques and how they would have preferred to be treated. A Burmese monk said, "There is a responsibility for foreigners to quiet their voice. Calm down and visit and get to know the people. Don't run in with your own agenda." It might surprise you how rarely aid workers, development staff, and volunteers take the time to listen to the people they plan to support.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

As sidekicks, we could add more value by dropping our capes and heading backstage. Not to become understudies, but to pick up our ear trumpets.[5] If we truly want to end poverty, we should listen to voices from other countries, other cultures. We should learn from them, admire them, and only enter the theater if, when, and how we are asked. My revised version is:

I will be a super-listener. Good intentions fail when we assume people need our help. I will listen, learn, and seek a deeper understanding of my role in poverty's end.

Questions for Reflection

- What assumptions do you have about people who live on less than $7 a day? In what ways do you think they can change their own lives?
- What assumptions do you have about your ability to offer help to someone who lives on less than $7 a day?
- What do you think might change about your assumptions if you had an opportunity to listen to one of those people? What about listening to 100 of them?

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Promise #5

I Will Welcome My Sidekick Slaps

I will make mistakes. When I do, I will take responsibility, hold myself accountable, and act differently moving forward.

Beyond the Slap: Accountability as Collective Care and Systemic Repair

by *Nikita Yasmin Shah*

Have you ever wondered what it might feel like to hold a mirror up and hold someone to account? My poem below captures the embodied experience of what I call the "educator's tax"—standing at the threshold where speaking up is both a necessity and a cost.

The educator's tax

How many times
will I be the only
voice in the room?
to pay the cost
of the educator's tax
as your words roll off your tongue so easily
piercing
a part of my being.
Shocked. Stunned. Silenced.

Whilst you carry on-
to the next point the next argument the next event the next conference the next . . .
Ignorance? Apathy? Privilege?

The thoughts come rushing.
My face flushing.
Heart pounding.
I check the pulse of the room.
Acts of complicity.

By
standers.
Standing by.
Standing by you? By me?
No. Just on stand-by.
Strategic silence
for the sake of the seat.

To them, a mountain out of a molehill,
but for me-
is this, *the* hill?
Who will break the quiet?

I scan the faces.
Averted eyes. Muted mics.
Some are holding their tongue to stay safe.
Others holding, for comfort in complicity.
The weight sits on my chest alone
Until-

My eyes focus. I realize I am not alone.
One person, taking notes, to share the weight,
an account so my words are not bent back against me.
Another, using her voice to explain how
the status quo seeks to please its owner.
It colonizes our minds.
It colonizes our bodies.
She reminds you-
to drop the defensiveness.
To listen.

Just like you wanted us to help you do.
Actively, listen.

Or when you reach for the sandpaper
asking us to soften the edges so they're easier for you to hold.
More palatable.
Whilst we are grazed by the words,
the truth, left raw and unsanitized.

I take a breath, deeply,
I ask the big three:
Is it safe?
Is this my battle?
Will this voice build a bridge to change?

I call you,
the witness,
in.
Inviting you from the sideline
to say goodbye to being on stand-by
to step into the lead.

For you to use your voice,
to lift the weight from being a solo debt
towards a shared currency of care.

To educate.
To unlearn.

I will not educate you
at the cost of myself.

I call you in to check the accounts.
I trust the work begins after the silence:
An apology
Then repair.
Rooted in care.

Unlearning spoken loudly.

In safety,
in solidarity,
with accountability,
We speak.

The Myth of the Individual "Slap"

In the 2016 *Sidekick Manifesto*, the promise to "welcome a sidekick slap" was rooted in a necessary humility. A commitment for individuals to self-correct and learn to "act differently." But this framing presented accountability as one-dimensional. In 2026, we must ask: Who slapped whom? Why was it a slap? What is the cost of rooting "correction" in violence masked as grace?

Accountability spotlights a relational ecosystem. To understand the weight of the "slap," we must identify the participants:

- Harm-doer: Maintains the status quo. Intentionally or otherwise, they cause harm.
- Educator: Often the person most harmed, instinctively expected to carry the labor and emotional burden through explanation and support.
- Witness: The bystander who remains strategically silent to protect their position or the ally whose silence is rooted in shared unsafety.
- Support: Community members who step in and share the risk, load, and pain.

In 2016, the "slap" was what the Harm-doer received. Now, in 2026, the "slap" is the cost of speaking up. As a neurodivergent, Global Majority woman, the "slap" has rarely been metaphorical. It is the literal and figurative weight of being the lone voice in a room, expected to provide a pedagogical masterclass each time a peer makes a "well-intentioned" mistake. We are expected to not only

absorb the blow, grant grace, and hold space for their emotions while neglecting our own, but also teach them how to fix it. On their first offense, second—every time. All on our own time.

What Has Changed Since 2016?

The journey from 2016 to now has been marked by a shifting focus that feels jolting. In 2016, the international development sector's gaze was fixed on the refugee crisis and global mobility. A time when the rhetoric of borders brought xenophobia and racism to center stage.

But it was 2020 that forced a rupture. Following the murder of George Floyd and the global rise of the Black Lives Matter movement, the voices of Black and Global Majority communities grew louder, demanding to be heard. The sector responded following a predictable trajectory: first, the performative statements; a surge of DEI audits, anti-racism training, and decoloniality workshops. At the time, I, along with my peers, thought we were presented an opportunity to create change and shift the needle. Now, it is clear that momentum has halted. Today, we are witnessing a severe withdrawal of funding, deprioritization of equity-based work, despite the urgent call for justice. We live in a world where human rights are being violated in Palestine, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan, and elsewhere globally. We see a horrifying lack of global accountability, where those showing solidarity and support are often punished rather than protected.

A Pattern of Defensiveness

Over the past decade, I noticed a clear pattern in my work as a consultant. I alongside my peers would be hired for our expertise and lived experiences until the moment we presented our findings. Enthusiasm was replaced by defensiveness and requests to "water down" the language of staff experiences. We were met by shock at

how much power people will privilege and how much power needs to be redistributed, and a demand that I soften the harsh realities of others to make them palatable for institutions.

This constant negotiation of truth carries a somatic price. In my research project, *Tonight We Rest,* I explored the specific burden carried by Global Majority women and non-binary practitioners—the healers, educators, and advocates. I found a constant form of invisible labor—"being on," prioritizing the learning of the Harm-doer over their own safety and rest required for sustainable advocacy, resistance, and repair. This confirmed that accountability is not just about what happens in the room, but what we are allowed to set down when we leave.

As Tricia Hersey reminds us in *Rest is Resistance*, the refusal to perform this labor is not a failure of solidarity; it is a prerequisite for survival.[1] True accountability must move away from this extractive model and toward a shared responsibility where the "sidekick" does the heavy lifting of their own unlearning before they ever step into the room.

Strategies for Safety

1. The Big Three

To protect my nervous system from becoming a resource for others' growth, I developed an internal safety audit.

Before deciding whether to hold someone to account, I pause and notice what is happening in my body. These are the "Big Three" somatic inquiries I ask myself:

- At what cost? Is it safe enough? Can my nervous system handle what follows?
- Is this the hill? Is this my battle to fight today, or can I lean on my community?

- Is it that deep? Is there an opportunity to use my voice to spark change? If I do not use my voice, will I regret it?

If the answer is no, I grant myself permission to be silent. I recognize that having a community to lean on and to share the load enables me to assess when I can and cannot step into the role of the educator. Not always being on means I can rest, practice rest as resistance and radical joy. Not everything should cost me my peace.

2. "Oops and Ouch"

Another helpful strategy is a practice called "Oops and Ouch." In my work with young people, we utilize "Oops and Ouch" as a simple yet highly effective tool. "Oops and Ouch" is a consent-based communication framework. If I say something that hits a nerve or causes harm, you say "Ouch." I respond with "Oops." At that moment, the harm is acknowledged without a 20-minute derailment or a defensive spiral. It creates a linguistic "pause" button that also replaces the overwhelming ambiguity.

This is the embodiment of calling in rather than calling out. It allows the person impacted to state they have been hurt. It grants the person who made the mistake the opportunity to reframe and understand the impact in real-time. But for this to work, it must be rooted in psychological safety. If I am in a space where I am constantly braced for a "slap," my nervous system cannot learn; it can only survive. By using tools like "Oops and Ouch," we move accountability into the realm of care. We create a space where repair is the goal, not punishment. We acknowledge that while we will inevitably trip over our own biases, we have a collective net to catch one another.

3. Repair

Accountability must be rooted in collective care, which forms the infrastructure that makes systemic repair possible; a journey of (un)learning that moves beyond the performative apology.

- Repair requires time and agency: Borrowing the concept of "crip time" allows us to process, reflect, and regulate, which helps us step outside the principle of urgency. Next, we ask a simple yet transformative question: "How do you need to receive feedback?" This allows the other person to receive feedback in a format that enables them to process, reflect, and make meaningful change. Finally, a commitment to make the change.
- Repair rejects the immediate apology as the final destination: An apology in the moment often serves the comfort of the Harm-doer rather than the safety of the person who experienced harm. Repair rejects the burden of change placed on the Educator and refuses the extraction of their emotional labor and knowledge as a prerequisite for the Harm-doer's growth.
- Repair protects the capacity of the community: It ensures that the responsibility to educate, understand, and heal is distributed across a network rather than moving the "educator" to the role of the "speaker." Ultimately, it protects the agency of the "speaker," highlighting that relationships of accountability can be strengthened by collective care.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

I promise to hold others to account only when it is safe to do so and does not come at the cost of myself. I promise to be called into accountability as an act of collective care, ensuring my own learning never happens at the expense of another's safety or labor. When harm occurs, I will move beyond the silence and act to repair from a place of understanding and not urgency.

Accountability is a two-way street that requires a sustainable framework of psychological safety. We must move away from the

"slap," a singular, often violent or corrective moment and toward a shared practice where the wellbeing of the speaker is as protected as the growth of the listener.

Questions for Reflection

- How would I like to be held accountable?
- How can I practice "allyship as a shared load" so the burden of accountability does not fall solely on those most impacted?
- In what ways has my search for "learning" inadvertently extracted labor or emotional energy from others?
- When I am held accountable, am I genuinely looking to repair the harm, or am I performing an apology to move past the discomfort?
- Do I know how to regulate my own nervous system so I can make an informed, consent-based decision on whether it is safe enough for me to hold someone else to account?

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Promise #6

I Will Step Out of the Spotlight

Sustainable solutions to poverty come from within, are bottom-up, and flow from local leaders taking the risks of holding their politicians accountable and challenging the status quo.

Beyond the Spotlight: From Humility to Responsibility

by *Hasangani (Hasi) Edema-Reynolds*

Stepping out of the spotlight isn't about disappearing, but about reckoning with how our presence and absence shape what unfolds without getting in the way. In 2016, this promise felt radical. In 2026, while it still matters, the promise no longer feels sufficient.

Back then, many of us were waking up to the damage caused by savior narratives, top-down development, and well-funded certainty. "Stepping out of the spotlight" offered a correction to an aid system built on influence, voice, and authority flowing from the outside in. It was an act of humility. It was a refusal to be the hero. It was the right thing to do.

Today, the promise still points in the right direction. But the world it assumed has changed. And so have we. We've learned that years of harm don't disappear because we leave. In a context of shrinking civic space, collapsing political and economic systems, and rising risks for those expected to lead, what matters is not whether we step back, but how power and risk are redistributed when we do.

Because absence is not the same as accountability.

What Still Holds

Some truths haven't budged.

Sustainable change still comes from within communities. Accountability still has to be local to be meaningful. People closest to the consequences of injustice still carry the greatest risk when they challenge it.

Money still distorts incentives, creating competition where cooperation once existed. It elevates some actors as "partners" while quietly sidelining others. Attention still confers power, shaping who is seen as credible, capable, and representative. Even well-designed programs or efforts can reinforce divisions if they rely on the same channels, reward the same voices, and depend on the same gatekeepers.

The promise holds because it gestures towards the right posture. Accompaniment rather than control. But accompaniment is not passive. It requires ongoing attention to how relationships are reshaped, how risk is distributed, and how even quiet choices alter the terrain on which local accountability struggles to unfold.

What No Longer Holds

What no longer holds is the idea that stepping back automatically reduces harm.

In 2016, reducing visibility often did disrupt dominance. It loosened control, created space for local voices, and interrupted the reflex to lead. The original promise assumed a clean sequence: outside aid workers recede, local actors advance, accountability follows. But power rarely moves that neatly. It operates not just through visibility, but through access to resources, control of narratives, protection from consequences, and the ability to absorb failure. When we step out of the spotlight without reckoning with these

dynamics, we often leave intact the systems that reward compliance and punish dissent. The question is not only who leads, but who is exposed when things go wrong and who remains insulated from the fallout.

In 2026, stepping back can just as easily entrench harm. The aid system is shrinking, fragmenting, and in many places actively being dismantled. Funding has disappeared overnight. Long-term partnerships have been replaced with short funding cycles, risk-averse compliance regimes, and transactional relationships. At the same time, parts of the international aid system itself are being rolled back or discredited, leaving fewer intermediaries and fewer spaces where power can be challenged without immediate retaliation.

In this environment, accountability becomes harder, not easier. As international actors withdraw, accountability does not automatically move downward to communities. More often, risk is pushed onto individuals and organizations least able to absorb it, while decision-making concentrates among those best positioned to manage donor expectations or political pressure.

Failure in exposed contexts is interpreted as incapacity rather than vulnerability. Some actors are framed as unreliable or too risky, while others are deemed safe, neutral, and effective. These judgments rarely reflect competence alone. They reflect who can absorb uncertainty without reputational or material collapse. This is how unjust systems quietly rebuild and sustain themselves.

This is also why calls to "empower local communities" deserve both affirmation and scrutiny. Empowerment cannot mean transfer of responsibility without transfer of protection, resources, or influence. In a shrinking system, "localization" can become a euphemism for abandonment. One of the most persistent blind spots in this promise is how easily it romanticizes local risk, celebrating "local leaders taking risks" without asking whether those risks are shared,

supported, or quietly extracted. Courage is praised from positions of safety; resistance is admired without sitting with its cost. If stepping out of the spotlight leaves the most vulnerable people carrying the greatest danger, we haven't reduced harm; we've simply moved it out of view. The term "local" itself carries weight, marking some people as contextual, particular, or risky while reinforcing a divide between those who are presumed to be neutral, professional, or universal. The term can unintentionally flatten complexity and obscure the fact that people in the so-called Global South are navigating global systems they did not design, while those in the West often retain mobility, voice, and exit options even when they "step back."

In this context, the assumption that less international presence equals less power no longer holds. The more urgent question is how power, accountability, and risk are redistributed as the system contracts. Stepping back without grappling with these dynamics does not neutralize power; it often leaves the most exposed people carrying more of it, with fewer tools to challenge it.

A Moment I Didn't Hear Until Later

I once facilitated a workshop with local partners on communication and what the sector calls "beneficiary stories." I was trying to do this carefully, centering humanity, respect, dignity, consent, avoiding stereotypes, and pushing back on the worst clichés. I remember thinking it was going well. The conversations felt open. People nodded.

Later, I learned that during the workshop, one of the local partners had leaned over to another and said in their language, not to me, *"We know why they want these pictures and ask us to take them this way, that way."*

At first, I was defensive, but what stayed with me wasn't defensiveness or embarrassment. It was recognition. I had stepped

out of the spotlight. I wasn't demanding stories or images. I was doing what I thought was correct. And still, the purpose of the exercise was clear to them in a way it hadn't been to me.

The workshop wasn't neutral. The stories weren't neutral. The pictures weren't neutral. They existed inside a system where certain narratives unlock funding, legitimacy, and attention, and everyone in the room understood that, even if only some of us could name it safely.

That comment wasn't resistance. It was risk management. Saying it to me would have changed the dynamic. Saying it to each other preserved it.

I was left wondering: how often do we mistake silence for agreement when it is really strategy? What power are we exercising when we never have to ask that question out loud?

Power Analysis as a Daily Practice

Long before we analyze programs or policies, we are already navigating power in everyday interactions. Who speaks first, who apologizes quickly, whose discomfort lingers, whose ideas need translation to be heard—these are not separate from "real" power analysis. These are its most basic forms.

Frameworks like CDA's *Do No Harm* are useful here, not as solutions but as disciplines of attention. The core idea is simple: every action we take interacts with the context around us. Every choice strengthens some relationships and strains others. Who can speak without fear? Who is protected when things fail? These are not abstract questions; they are lived through consequences, daily.

Power analysis isn't about getting it right every time. It's about staying attentive.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

The original promise was about humility. The next iteration of this promise must be about responsibility. One way to reframe it is:

I will step out of the spotlight and not confuse invisibility with accountability. I will actively examine power, name risk honestly, and use the influence I carry, without centering myself, to support community-led change that challenges, rather than stabilizes, unjust systems.

Stepping out of the spotlight may still be necessary. But it has never been sufficient.

Questions for Reflection

In everyday interactions:

- Who adjusted themselves, and who didn't have to?
- Who is expected to keep the peace, and who is allowed to be sharp, tired, or angry?

In programs and partnerships:

- Who benefits from this action and who will bear the cost if it fails?
- Where is accountability flowing? Upward? Downward? Or is it shared?

Interrogating our own insulation:

- Whose silence am I interpreting as agreement, and what risk might that silence be managing?
- What protection exists for those we are asking to take risks for change?
- When does non-interference become complicity?

I've seen this kind of power awareness change group dynamics in quiet and healthy ways. Teams that rotate facilitation, so the same voices don't always lead. Friends who check in privately with the person who didn't speak, rather than praising consensus too quickly.

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Promise #7

I Will Exercise Narrative Humility

I cannot know another's story of material poverty. I don't know how it began or how it will end. It is not my story. Before sharing it with others, I will seek permission: No More Stolen Stories.

Our Windows are Not the Same

by *Marie-Jeanne Kenji Maghoma*

I grew up on the ground floor of a block of flats. The block was designed in a circle with all these windows looking in on each other. Four floors, so it wasn't too high, but as a child it felt grand. At night, the whole place would light up and I remember thinking that this imperfect circle looked almost magical. Every window had a story behind it.

I would make up stories about Number 28 with the frilly curtains or Number 47 with the stickers. I couldn't see the windows right above me but the sound from their CD player gave me just enough to imagine the rest.

It never occurred to me that they could see our window too. My family and I were Number 4 in someone else's story.

Isn't it strange? The concept of a hole in the wall, decorated with glass. It allows us to see small moments in each other's lives. We can imagine what's happening inside but without asking, can we ever really know? Should we even be looking at all?

Maybe humility begins in these questions. After all, epistemic humility is defined in philosophy as the recognition that "knowledge. . . is always interpreted, structured, and filtered by the observer."[1] Narrative humility extends this into the space of stories,

reminding us that observation is not the same as understanding and that humility begins with admitting our limits. We're all looking through windows but seeing alone is never simple.

What Has Changed Since 2016

Ten years on, narrative humility feels ahead of its time. Right now, stories are currency; they move hearts, and hearts move money, power, and attention. It feels like we are at the helm of the story-economy where the rise of media platforms has increased the rate of connectivity and (mis)information sharing. In many ways, the internet has become a giant block of flats. Millions of windows into each other's lives. At the same time global narratives are under pressure to be bigger and louder, from inequality and debt crises to climate disruption and migration. We possibly have the largest number of activists protesting online and on the streets in history. Everyone can be a storyteller.

But there are unintended consequences as stories propagate faster and faster. In a digital world with few rules on consent, ownership, and ethical framing, we risk appropriating climate stories in service of our own narratives to "save" nature; we risk telling stories about the movement of people without permission to "amplify" others; and we risk repeating outdated stories of "poverty" and "rescue" rather than acknowledging complexity and agency.

The Fragility of Translation

I remember watching a news report as protests broke out in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where I was born. The broadcaster was interviewing people in the crowd, voices carried in French and Lingala, urgent and defiant. When the translation came through, something felt off. The English subtitles said the protester was afraid. My heart sank as I realized that wasn't what they'd said. The

man had spoken of anger, not fear. He was rallying for answers, not seeking rescue.

It was a small change, just one word. That word shifted the entire story: from collective demand to personal vulnerability, from agency to victimhood. If I didn't know the language, I likely would have shared the news coverage with friends and colleagues, carrying forward someone else's story, and the wrong one at that. I realized how fragile stories can become when passed through translation and how easy it is to repeat a story that isn't fully ours. Just like that, a voice can be stolen.

Sometimes the window we are looking through feels clear, but the glass is rarely perfect. And fragile things require care.

The Humility of Being Wrong

The mission of my work is to change the narrative on the global movement of people. I know I'm not always going to get things right. I have to remind myself of that often. As it was in 2016, migration is under a microscope and it is not lost on me that every word, image, data point used carries weight.

The difficult part is that most stories are shared wrapped in hopes, dreams, and sometimes our own reflection. We see something that moves us: injustice, resilience, beauty—and we want others to see it too. We want people to care. Narrative humility asks for a small pause before that impulse takes over. Activist and writer bell hooks talked about humility as having "a capacity for self-criticism."[2] I think of that as the quiet moment where we admit to ourselves: I might not have this quite right.

Sitting with the discomfort of being wrong is, well, uncomfortable. But it becomes easier when I remember I'm not alone in doing it. We are all working with fragments, glimpses, and small pieces of different stories. So, here is something I will try to hold onto and

perhaps you might too: recognizing that you might be wrong means you are still paying attention. It means you are willing to listen again, to seek other perspectives, or to step back completely.

This promise can be the anchor that holds us there.

The Decision

KEEP the promise.

Ten years on from the first *Sidekick Manifesto*, narrative humility requires us to be honest about what we know and what we don't. After all, our windows are not the same.

Storytelling requires that kind of honesty.

Questions for Reflection

Here are five questions that I choose to apply in my own work:

- What does it mean to be the observer or the owner of this story?
- What do I and don't I understand?
- Do I have permission to narrate or share this story?
- Am I painting my own reflection on someone else's life, reflecting my own assumptions, biases, and worldview?
- Am I asking the right questions?

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Promise #8

I Will Explore My Dark Side

I will ask, "Do I want poverty to end? Who would I be without it? What would I do? Do my politics and consumption patterns perpetuate poverty? Am I complicit in its persistence?"

The True Power of the Things We Suppress

by *Mary Ann Clements*

In the daily grind of my work leading change within an INGO, I ask myself, "Do I really want to do myself out of a job?"

I still remember writing that in an essay during my undergrad degree in the late 1990s.

And yet, though by accident at first, having only signed up for a short assignment purely on the basis of my language skills, I have been in and around this sector now for well over 20 years.

And now I co-lead an organization in it.

What am I doing? What are we doing?

Why have we not yet eradicated poverty and dismantled our sector?

Are we really secretly wanting it to continue so that we don't lose our jobs?

Stepping Back

When I step back. Far back. Take time away from my desk. Try to have the "bird's eye" view. Across time and space.

When I am able to do this, often out in the fresh air, then I do, I really do. I want a world where this kind of work we call "development" (a deeply problematic term) isn't necessary.

I want it all to be gone because we have reached a reality where there is no need for it.

Where there is freedom and justice and care for all.

Period.

And where all of life can make choices to do whatever inspires and energizes it without fear of harm.

Is that desire hard to remember in the daily grind of the "development" job? Absolutely. The daily grind is a problem. It can get in the way.

And, for sure, I enjoy my work and I want to do something meaningful, feel I have a purpose.

And so, yes, there are contradictions there.

Meanwhile I know that it's likely impossible to do anything in modern life that doesn't in some way have a potential negative impact, whether on climate or poverty.

So toxic are the systems we live in, so destructive are they to the web of life.

These tensions are to me, inherent to my work and to our sector. As well as the wider world and cultures we exist within.

The Shadow

The psychological concept of the dark side, or the shadow as Jung named it, invites us to look at the parts of ourselves that we may be suppressing.

Exploring our shadows means looking at the things that we are trying not to be.

Through my practice as a Shadow Work Coach over the past 10 years, I have learnt that these are also often behaviors that seem to slip out by accident and, when they do, feel out of control.

Another way to think about this is that the things we have in shadow psychologically are the things that we have shoved in what Robert Bly calls our "shadow bag" because we don't approve of them or they are not approved of by those around us. He describes the shadow bag as an invisible load we drag behind us, that weighs us down.

Applying this idea to NGOs as institutions, I have noticed over the years that behaviors that are contrary to our beliefs and values do very much seem to "slip out by accident."

They are like shadows—things we are trying pretty hard not to do or accept amongst us—but seem to show up anyway and create invisible weights that impact what we can achieve.

I have long lost track of the number of NGOs where toxic culture seems to have shown up even when everyone was trying to be nice to each other!

Naming this as a collective shadow—something that we are desperately trying not to do—but that tends to "pop out" anyway, provides an alternative strategy for addressing the toxicity: *acknowledging the true power of the things that we suppress.*

The Inner and Outer Work of Change

The emotions we feel about the complicated work of change, both positive and negative, may also be inadvertently in shadow—both because contradictions can be hard to name and describe, and because in so many organizations, expressing emotions is

unwelcome and looking after ourselves and each other is neither valued nor prioritized.

Much easier to instead focus on the mission in hand, the terrible injustices in the world, and allow this to keep us busy, ALL THE TIME.

This goes hand in hand with the idea of a "perfect humanitarian," a phrase Gemma Houldey has used to describe a savourist identity that is also rooted in denying our own humanity.

As a result, even where NGOs pay lip service to wellbeing many still have a culture of unrealistic expectations of staff and prioritize "action" at all costs.

In these environments human beings end up being "expendable" in service of the mission whether they realize it or not.

When we work all the hours in pursuit of long-term change, positing it as "urgent" when we know really that it will not happen quickly, and don't honor our personal need to express how we feel, rest, and take space from our work, we treat ourselves and one another as expendable.

And in this way, the collective shadow tends to grow, and we allow toxic behaviors to develop and fester in our workplaces.

The reality, as Hope Chigudu says, is that "Care is the Work."[1] We cannot create a more care-full, equitable, and just world by treating ourselves and one another badly. We must include ourselves or we risk constant misalignment with our values.

In 2018, I planted the seed for an initiative called Healing Solidarity designed to shed some light on the importance of honoring the connection between the inner and outer work of change. Fifteen hundred people signed up for the first online event I created suggesting that this dissonance resonated with a great many people across the sector.

Through that work I learnt that we must keep naming this, keep reminding of this. Existing ways of being and doing die hard even when we can see the contradictions and the lack of alignment.

Justice is Within as Well as Without

Justice is as much within us as it is "out there." A consequence of our capitalist, patriarchal society is the idea that people are expendable. Slavery and colonialism are the ultimate expressions of this. But we all live in and participate in these cultures, to some extent, whether we are aware of them or not.

We participate in them when we deny that we have needs, that we have limits, that we cannot indefinitely expand ourselves for the missions of our organizations.

When we are honest about the shadows, about all the things we are trying not to be, then the goal is no longer to suppress any part of ourselves that enjoys the work for change and may want it to continue in the immediate future.

Instead, we can move into a place where we are able to be honest about the contradictions, complexity, and "both/and" of what we do.

If we can do more of that, I think we may find that we are also collectively suppressing some of the creative and emotional energy we need to play the most effective sidekick role that we can in creating a more just and equitable world.

By embracing the contradictions and our messy feelings about them, I think we may also unearth and rekindle the passion for the work, for the change our sector exists to create.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

Building on the original promise to "explore my dark side," the new promise I propose takes this further and invites us to name the contradictions, the things we fear to name, so that what is avoided or suppressed loses its invisible power, releasing power that can help us be part of healing injustice. The new promise is:

I will explore my dark side and bring it into my conscious awareness. I will speak about it so that it loses its toxic power. By openly embracing the contradictions that cannot be avoided, I will stay present to the "both/and" implicit in this work.

Questions for Reflection

- What parts of your own motivations or truth might you be inadvertently suppressing because they don't fit with the way you think someone in the sector ought to behave?
- What contradictions or paradoxes do you want to name and work with more consciously?
- How can you more effectively balance the inner and outer work of change?

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Promise #9

I Will Read Ivan Illich's "To Hell with Good Intentions" Repeatedly

Politicians, celebrities, and billionaire philanthropists will tell me I can be a hero. I cannot. The poor are not powerless or waiting to be saved. Illich will check my delusions of grandeur.

Should We Flip Development on its Head, Intentionally?

by *Ann Hendrix-Jenkins*

In 1968, Catholic priest Ivan Illich addressed young American volunteers headed to rural Mexico. He bluntly posited that they were not going as helpers, but as "salesmen" for the unavailable American middle-class ideals of democracy, public schools, equal opportunity, and free enterprise. They would be promoting a "false religion" of acquisition, consumption, and achievement . . . a belief system "simply not alive enough to be shared," a doomed political and social system that enriches the rich and marginalizes the poor.

Nearly 60 years later, Illich might see the US domestic turmoil as the inevitable product of the "false religion." As for the US internationally, 2025 saw the shuttering of the U.S. government's Agency for International Development, the largest humanitarian agency in the world. From this, and other radical changes launched in 2025, ripple effects will reverberate for decades. Perhaps this era of upheaval offers a fresh opportunity to revisit the deep concept of *intention.*

Intention shapes everything. Philosophers and spiritual leaders from East, West, and diverse indigenous traditions point to the *intention* that exists within each person and community as humanity's driving

force. As an "energetic blueprint, the conscious creation of one's inner reality," intentions rooted in love and interconnectedness are the precursor to what Buddhists call "Right Action" or what Westerners might describe as "good deeds" or "manifesting well-being."[1] Misguided or negative intentions have obvious implications. So, as a historian and a theologian, Illich's focus on *intention as the root cause of action* is not surprising.

Backing the Truck Up

Modern aid efforts are often derided as "the white savior industrial complex." Is it fair to characterize saviorism as the intention driving much aid? Many might object, saying the efforts are simply about helping out poor people.

Critics describe modern aid efforts as corporatized, colonial, and even militaristic in language and practice. They deride professionalized technocrats from so-called *developed* countries, armed with *solutions,* who parachute into the *frontlines* to *impact target populations* (or *beneficiaries)* via *interventions* or *campaigns*. Critics charge that efforts based on such implicit and explicit intent actually cause harm by undermining dignity, voice, and agency. To boot, many of the gains (when achieved) dissipate once the *expats* (Latin for "from the fatherland") leave the *field* and go back to *the mission* or *NGO headquarters*. So why would the well-intentioned American public—and development professionals, donors, and nonprofits—create such patronizing programs? Where is the way forward?

Maslow's Hierarchy of…Othering?

An internet search for "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs" yields *tens of millions* of hits. It's taught in schools, universities, and championed by businesses and marketers. You are probably familiar with it.

Essentially, this 80-year-old *theory* states that a human cannot become psychologically or emotionally mature until their biological survival needs are fully met (including breathing, food, water, shelter, sex, warmth, and rest). That means that the billion or more people in this category are trapped at the bottom level of the iconic Maslow's pyramid, perhaps for their whole lives. According to the theory, those people cannot become "actualized human beings." They are unable to think abstractly, have a sense of humor, be moral, respect themselves, or enjoy romantic relationships. They cannot reach "peak experience" which includes experiencing joy and having insights.

Maslow's Hierarchy is so baked into our psyches that most people rarely question how paternalistic, neo-colonial, and frankly supremacist it is. It enables a modern characterization of the "primitive savage."

The trouble began even before this theory took shape. In 1938, psychologist Abraham Maslow spent six weeks with the Blackfoot Native American tribe. Blackfoot culture holds that a community must first get its intangibles in order (e.g. restorative justice, harmony with nature, cooperation). The group will then be able to take care of tangible, biological needs.

Maslow flipped that concept completely. But his theory only went viral when it was portrayed as a pyramid and published in *Business Horizons* magazine in 1960. The idea: convince consumers to spend money on physical needs (think "self-care") and the emotional and psychological benefits will follow. Good for business.

Back to Illich's focus on intentions. A "Maslow mindset" can explain why well-meaning international supporters presume to know what's needed by people they've never met, in countries they've never been to, and know very little about. It can also explain why NGOs often raise money by putting out catalog-style fundraisers: for XX donation, buy a poor family a new toilet or handwashing

station or vitamin supplements or goat. With good intentions, donors buy handouts intended to meet "basic needs."

But what would those local people prioritize? Every setting is unique and complex. Aside from basic questions of effectiveness, by making decisions from afar, well-intentioned people and organizations take away "target population's" power to control their own lives. Maslow's theory belies this demeaning paternalism: it says that people can't think for themselves UNTIL they have access to these material products that will meet their physical needs. That, in effect, they are like children. Those of us who have already had our physical needs met—higher up the pyramid—will do the thinking for now. The irony is that anyone who has spent time in difficult settings knows that's where you will meet some of the most "actualized" and inspiring people on earth. Visionary. Innovative. Philosophical. Brave. Positive. In fact, many of history's greatest heroes emerged from non-Maslow-acceptable conditions.

There is an even deeper, well-documented level of intangible harm this can cause. Decades of to-the-rescue charity work have fostered an epidemic of the psychological constraint called *Learned Helplessness*. Many of today's high-quality community-led development efforts must start by undoing collectively internalized defeatism.[2]

The Decision

KEEP the promise.

Double down on the promise.

Working internationally calls us to question our concepts, values, language, and more. Our intentions are often rooted in reductionism, like Maslow's theory. We lump all of Africa into one word and use binary categories like developed/developing and

Global North/South. Instead, we need nondualistic, nonlinear approaches to see the world—and people—in full complexity.

Crossing international borders demands clarity of intentions, and asking how to support dignity, voice, and agency . . . as well as values our global partners may also hold that we are not even aware of.

Illich offered three reasons those summer program leaders may have invited his frank criticism. They are still on point.

1. Illich suggests we have invited him to help make the case of shutting down the program: Yes, perhaps some programs should end. And let's not throw the baby out with the bathwater. Some cynics write off all aid as tainted, and I think that's a cop out.
2. Illich wonders if we have invited him as a token, or to simply practice dealing with critics: I seek to listen to Illich and others with a truly open heart and open mind, with willingness to discover my flawed assumptions, mistakes, and misconceptions. I avoid assuming critiques don't apply to me.
3. The biggest danger: Illich suggests we will listen to him, agree with most of what he says, and yet still go through with our plans. He says this option is for "those who do not listen, or who cannot understand me." I have been a part of projects and organizations that were not open to even the mildest internal queries about the deep nature of the work. On the other hand, I wrote articles that reached tens of thousands of readers, many of whom contacted me to express similar doubts and frustrations. We must not give up before that last step—after listening and agreeing, actually changing the plan. Creative ways forward are infinite.

Much international development infrastructure has been recently wiped out. As we seek to recover, this is a fresh opportunity to sincerely question everything, starting with our own intentions. Looking back on 30 years as a Westerner working in development (starting as a well-intentioned Peace Corps volunteer), I recognize that if I could see then what I think I see now, I would do a lot differently. Starting with questioning everything, constantly. I'll take the good I've learned forward—like sophisticated community-led development approaches. And I will not only leave the rest behind, but I will also speak out against it.

Questions for Reflection

- Why do I feel compelled to take action to change the lives of people facing hardship?
- What do I get out of it? And is that okay?
- How might clarity of intention help me take "right action?"
- Do I harbor a stereotype that people living in more basic conditions are somehow simpler than myself? If so, how can I dismantle that?
- Do I take for granted that I know what people and communities want and need?

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Promise #10

I Will Hang Up My Cape

In my search for meaning and significance, I will learn to turn inward and activate my own agency before trying to eradicate another's material poverty—which I cannot.

Your Cape is Heavy Enough

by *Pauline Wambeti*

For years, I believed my significance was measured by the scale of the external problems I could solve. My self-worth was directly tied to my utility. I lived with a cape perpetually tied around my neck, always scanning the horizon for the next disaster, the next injustice, the next person in need of saving. I defined myself as the helper, the fixer, the rescuer—the one who could eradicate another person's material poverty, whether it was financial, intellectual, or emotional.

And every time, I failed. Not because my effort was lacking, but because my premise was flawed.

The Grim Context of the Global South

My journey is rooted in my identity as a woman who hails from Kenya, a lower middle-income country in the Global South. For over 15 years, I have worked in various rural settings, places that reflect my own origins. It is impossible not to empathize with the grim reality on the ground. The World Bank describes the country's challenges as stagnated poverty reduction, poor labor market outcomes, weak productivity and wage growth. The 2023 Kenya Poverty and Equity Assessment by the World Bank reveals that 39% of Kenyans live below the national poverty line, with poverty

increasing between 2020 and 2021 and projected to continue rising to over 43% from late 2025.[1] The World Data Lab reports that the prevalence rate for extreme poverty in rural Kenya was 86%, and of these, women and children are the most impacted.[2]

As a community development practitioner, it is hard not to internalize this data, especially when you have lived some of it. Despite working hard to break away from the challenges of my early life, my deep attachment to rural life always pulled me back to work there. I ended up yearning to play an active role in facilitating access to new knowledge, skills, and technology to improve livelihoods.

The Cape Was Woven at Home

The impulse to rescue, to fix, and to perpetually put others first was not developed in the field; it was woven into my earliest identity.

As the firstborn in a family of four in a rural setting, I learned my gender and birth-order roles quite early. I was not just a daughter; I was the "second mum." Sacrifice was not an option; it was a requirement—a badge of honor that came with being the eldest girl. My clothes, my shoes, my books—everything I owned—were only mine temporarily. I was taught to own them responsibly, which meant ensuring they survived long enough to be passed down. My needs were secondary to the longevity of the resource. This ingrained focus on resource management and external perfection followed me everywhere. My mother's stern corrections—"Tuck in your stomach and stand upright! Walk straight, don't walk like a duck!"—were about more than posture; they were about reflecting the value of the luxury we possessed. Shoes were a symbol of her achievement.

Yet, the disparities of development lingered on, even in my own life. I often encounter them, and they take me back to my early years of school when I now had to remove my shoes in order to fit in. My shoes were a distraction and would provide hilarious moments after

class, when my classmates would wear them in turns (each one leg only) and strut about in giggles. The external "fix"—the shoes—did not integrate me; it isolated me.

This mentality was reinforced by the powerful family narrative of sacrifice: my mother only received an education because her elder sister stayed home for the benefit of the family. I saw the clear lesson: giving up your own opportunity for the benefit of another is the highest form of virtue.

I took that generational cape, woven from necessity and love, and wore it as a permanent costume, believing my worth was tied to how many external problems I could solve.

Turning Inward, 2016 and Beyond: The Real Frontier

The true quest for meaning does not begin with a flight outward; it begins with a journey inward.

I am finally learning to hang up my cape and place it gently on the back of the chair. This is not an act of surrender or selfishness; it is a profound act of reorientation. My energy must first be channeled into activating my own agency—the power to manage my inner world, define my own values, and act in alignment with my true self.

This looks like:

- Defining My Own "Enough": Understanding that my worth is inherent, not earned through tireless service.
- Cultivating Inner Wealth: Addressing my own spiritual, emotional, and intellectual deficits first, creating a wellspring from which to draw, not a dry tap.
- Setting Boundaries: Protecting the energy that allows me to be useful without being drained.

The Paradigm Shift: Power of Agency (Theirs and Mine)

The crucial difference between the old way and the new is a recognition of mutual agency.

When I was the "savior," I subconsciously treated the recipient of my help as a passive object of change. This mindset was replicated on a larger scale in the development and donor aid space. However, the "saviors" are now "running out" of money and in 2025 and into 2026, leading donors have scaled back official development assistance (ODA) by billions of dollars.[3] Development is moving away from "fixing people" to "partnering with systems."

Development facilitators should not be the "pipers who call the tune," ultimately deciding how resources will be applied, how things will be done, or how success will be defined. That external imposition strips away the very power—the agency—that lasting change requires. When external resources dry up, the only thing left is the internal agency of the local people. Mutual agency ensures that when the "facilitator" leaves (or the funding stops), the momentum does not. Mutual agency respects that local communities have the experiential knowledge that no external expert can replicate. Without their agency, any "solution" is just a temporary patch. In 2026, the "savior" is not only a flawed identity; it is an obsolete one. As Kenya navigates a landscape of reduced global aid and tightening fiscal austerity, the old model of external "fixes" is crumbling. We can no longer afford to treat development as a one-way street of sacrifice. Mutual agency—the recognition that both the contributor and the community are powerful, self-directed actors—is the only sustainable path forward. When we hang up our capes, we stop being a temporary lifeline and start being a catalyst for the enduring power that already exists within our rural communities.

When I activate my own agency, I can then approach the world not as a rescuer, but as a contributor who respects the autonomy of others. My role shifts from trying to solve someone's life to simply

sharing what I have built within my own. My ability to make an external difference is now directly proportional to the integrity and strength of my internal foundation.

Hanging up the cape is the admission that I am not the hero in anyone else's story. I am only the hero in my own. And only from that stable, self-directed place can I truly and sustainably serve others—not from obligation, but from overflow.

I have found myself reflecting, comparing, contrasting, always pondering. What change am I driving? What impact have I achieved? Have I improved on my mother's legacy? What will I achieve as a mother?

We have all been conditioned to believe that sacrifice is the only noble path. But the weight of that cape is making us weary and ineffective. Stop trying to eradicate material poverty that is not yours to fix.

Instead, take that precious, finite energy and channel it into the single most impactful project you will ever undertake: the activation of your own agency. Invest in your own stability. Cultivate your own inner wealth. Define your own "enough." When your internal foundation is strong, you will not need a cape to be significant. You will be significant because you are whole.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

In 2016, hanging up the cape meant rejecting a savior complex. In 2026, it also means recognizing that the savior model itself is no longer sustainable in a post-aid world.

My revised promise is:

I will hang up my cape and activate my agency in ways that honor and strengthen the agency of others.

Will you choose to hang up your cape today?

Questions for Reflection

Reflection is the first step toward true agency. Use the questions below as a mirror to see where your own cape was woven—and where you might finally choose to lay it down:

- Is your "helpfulness" a conscious choice, or is it a requirement for you to feel worthy?
- Are you treating the people you help as partners with their own power, or as passive projects for you to fix?
- What would remain of your identity if you stopped being "useful" for just one week?

Additional Readings

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Promise #10

I Will Hang Up My Cape

In my search for meaning and significance, I will learn to turn inward and activate my own agency before trying to eradicate another's material poverty—which I cannot.

A Call to Action at a Time of Surrender

by *Jason Taylor*

I love the *Sidekick Manifesto*. Reading through it is like retracing the path of my 20-year career as an international development professional.

I learned how to ride in the sidecar early on as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Central America. I had an abundance of enthusiasm but a concerning lack of things that I'd actually figured out in life so far. What had I to offer the Mayan women's craft group I was assigned to assist? I had no clue. It was terrifying.

It turns out that time is a valuable resource and I had plenty of that. Sometimes folks don't need someone to come. They need someone to stay. Together, the Mayan ladies and I figured things out and the group made headway. I found a role for myself—not always straightforward or mistake-free; I had my share of sidekick slaps along the way. But I eventually understood that I had more to contribute than I first thought, and I found my place. I just needed to give things time. Let relationships build. I learned how not to force change, on myself or on others.

Later, I saw the dangers of the sirens of scale in Zimbabwe as a foreign service officer with the U.S. Agency for International Development, the lead agency that administered U.S. foreign

assistance. My local colleagues and I struggled to understand why our efforts to strengthen rural livelihoods were not showing the same impact across the scores of communities where we worked.

To figure this out, we became good understudies. We visited villages and talked to the people there. We looked honestly at the data coming out of our work and asked ourselves where we were doing well and where we were falling short. What was the secret sauce that separated development success from failure? The takeaway was that every community is unique (shocker!) and the drive to develop, and the desired nature of that development, are different for all of us. There is no one size that fits all.

Perhaps our greatest contribution to a Zimbabwean community's growth was not our utility belt loaded with technical training courses, but rather a process that nurtured a community's ability to articulate its own wants and desires. Our comparative advantage was not necessarily as a "doer" but rather as a "convener" providing a venue for dialogue within communities and between those communities and their elected leaders. Instead of delivering progress, we could introduce a framework for self-discovery that people could make their own. Our goal was to help start a journey, not point to a destination.

I learned these lessons and so many more over a career that brought me all over the world. I tried my best to feed these lessons back into my work, to further the state of development art. To become *more* humble over time, not less. I learned again and again the fundamental lesson from my Peace Corps service in a small, deceivingly complex village: the more I learned, the more I realized I had yet to learn. I'd never have all the answers but that was no excuse not to pitch in and be helpful, to teach and be taught myself.

What Changed Since 2016

Now I sit contemplating my dark side. Who am I without this work? What does it all amount to? USAID was dismantled by President Trump in 2025, which brought my foreign service career to an abrupt end. More significantly, it drastically reduced the international development efforts of the United States, which had a cascading and negative effect on the entire international aid system. The long-term implications of this unprecedented withdrawal from the humanitarian enterprise by the United States are difficult to judge, but the short- to medium-term impacts are as clear as they are devastating, as vaccines and medicines go undelivered and children who are dying of malnutrition await lifesaving interventions that for many will never come.

One study by a respected medical journal estimated that USAID efforts over a 20-year period prevented more than 90 million deaths thanks to lifesaving health and humanitarian efforts.[1] Critics argue that international aid is ineffective and wasteful. Others might tell you that these efforts do more to keep people down than lift them up. Aid is political and perpetuates the status quo, critics say.

It's absolutely true that the world of international aid—and the effort to end poverty more broadly—is full of contradictions and political crosscurrents. But does that make it wrong? In what world are 90 million lives saved considered bad policy?

Yes, we should certainly ask ourselves who we think we are to presume to help others overcome their hardships. But we should also ask ourselves who we are if we choose to do nothing. What does such inaction say about what we value? How does it build a more just and stable world?

The most compelling arguments for and against efforts to end poverty have less to do with the goal itself and more to do with how the work is done. The ambition to alleviate suffering—in ourselves

or in another—should be unassailable. And support for poverty eradication should be evergreen. But recent actions by the United States have shown us that it's not.

An Overlooked Dimension

In its current form, the *Sidekick Manifesto* assumes that the collective ambition to end poverty exists in some fundamental and broad-based way, and the Manifesto provides many of the best practices to harness that ambition effectively. But the new context in which we find ourselves, where the wealthiest nation in the world retreats from a legacy of international aid collaboration, shows that the longstanding commitment to eradicate poverty is far more tenuous than the *Sidekick Manifesto* originally assumed.

We are at an inflection point where norms are being reconsidered or dismissed altogether. There is a growing political bias to do less, not more. To settle for a perfect nothing, rather than an imperfect something. To opt out. So much of the *Sidekick Manifesto* highlights the challenges of intervening in another person's development journey. In the current discourse, those very challenges are used as a rationale for washing our hands of it entirely.

New Questions We Must Ask Ourselves

Where does that leave us? I'll tell you. We need a call to action.

How does the *Sidekick Manifesto* create—*manifest*—the ambition to help others? What does it do to instill in us the sense of tenacity and grit necessary to do this difficult, necessary work?

The journey to end poverty is a long one and we all have a part to play. The *Sidekick Manifesto* should be explicit about that. It should remind us that we must never abandon the cause. Because the cause is our duty as citizens of this world. To remind ourselves of this duty, the final promise can be revised.

Because I will NEVER hang up my cape.

The Decision

REIMAGINE the promise.

The original focused rightly on the need for reflection when considering one's role in another's development journey but ran the risk of suggesting that allies leave the battle to eradicate poverty rather than join it. I suggest the following revision:

I will never hang up my cape because there is a role for all of us to play in eradicating poverty; we just need the self-awareness, humility, and patience to find it.

Questions for Reflection

- What can I do to ensure that a person's journey out of poverty is about them, and not about me?
- How does a person's ability to lift themselves out of poverty benefit a community? How does it benefit the world?
- How can I communicate this benefit to my own community in a way that it will be understood and supported?

Additional Readings

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1. Daniella Medeiros Cavalcanti, et al., "Evaluating the impact of two decades of USAID interventions and projecting the effects of defunding on mortality up to 2030: A retrospective impact evaluation and forecasting analysis," *The Lancet* 406, 2025.

New Promise

I Will Attend to My Own Transformation

I know that change is often hard, messy, and uncomfortable. I will prepare myself for change, be on the lookout for signs that my molecules are being rearranged, and act accordingly.

Holy Gamma Rays, Batman! I Think My Molecules Have Been Rearranged!

by *Katrina Mitchell*

The first time I came home after a deep immersion in another country, I remember feeling alien, not myself. I felt out of place, out of my body, a step out of touch and time with things that had been familiar, normal, known just a few months before. Life at home had continued on in the way it does, and yet I no longer felt like me. I had been deeply impacted, like a superhero transformed by gamma rays or exposure to a strange substance—my molecules were completely rearranged. I looked (mostly) the same, and yet, deep inside there were fundamental shifts.

This same kind of molecular rearrangement happens in small and big ways all the time, whether or not we are aware! It happens when we encounter something new, or when we approach something familiar in a new way. Anywhere there is learning there is change. Anything can be an (un)intentional opportunity: facilitating a workshop or diving into learning, immersing in community, trying out a new food, reading a poem, or just washing the dishes. Yes, even the stuff of daily life can (and does) change us. These big or little moments can be openings to (un)intentionally confront our identity, our sense of self, and our ideas about the world. In *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler offers this provocation:

All that you touch
You Change.

All that you Change
Changes you.

The only lasting truth
is Change.

God
is Change.

Change is the constant state. Change is everywhere, all the time (and yes, all at once). To act, be, believe, or think otherwise is to be in an argument with reality. To miss the opportunity of the deeper truth of being here, being human, and being in the constantly unfolding, evolving present. And, to put ourselves in the path of change—as we do when we step into working in community, working on justice, working toward better futures, building movements, changing systems—is to actively embrace change, to accelerate transformation.

This can feel exciting. I usually think of myself as someone who loves a good adventure. I'm someone who says YES! to the messy challenge, the seemingly impossible project, the sticky situation. It's exciting at first, and then . . . as I get in a little further . . . it feels . . . overwhelming, messy. I feel lost. Doubt creeps in, or frustration, or feelings of inadequacy. Why DID I take this on? I don't know what I'm doing. I don't really want to be here, doing this now. This isn't how I thought it would be.

Our body shows signs when our long-held beliefs, core identities, or how we see the world are challenged. When we are immersed in change, we can find ourselves feeling crispier than usual, spiky, crunchy, sensitive. We can find ourselves tearing up or flaming up. We might want to sleep, hide, eat. These are not moral failures.

They are our body's attempt to say, hey! I need more energy to process this change that is coming at me!

Often, we miss the early signs that we're moving beyond our comfort zone. Disconnected from our bodies, and each other, we've learnt to ignore or discount these signs, or see them as a personal failure, "I can't do this," rather than an invitation, "... yet," that calls forth the question, "what am I grappling with here and what do I need to be able to hold this?"

When ignored or rushed, without discernment and tender compassion, discomfort can shut us down, halting transformation. We steep too long in the goo—inside the cocoon, liquefied into a soupy mess—resisting change already underway, afraid of what's to come. Or pain festers, blows up, or leaks onto others. To be responsible for our transformation is to bring attention, care, and compassion to ourselves, expanding our capacity to move through change, to let the butterfly become.

We can increase our response-ability to change. What that looks like differs for each person, situation, and moment. Some of the ways we can be responsible about how change moves through us include:

- Increasing our capacity for change. We can expand our "window of tolerance," creating good conditions for change before, during, and after it happens. Plenty of rest, hydration, good food, movement (hiking, physical work, DANCE PARTIES), mindfulness, and strong friendships help us process change. Extra credit for seeking wonder, joy, and awe with curiosity and creativity.

- Tending to overwhelm. Sometimes we're pushed outside our comfort zone. It happens. We can move through it more effectively by noticing the signs and understanding our nervous system's go-to response (fight, flight, freeze,

fawn), then bringing curiosity, compassion, and care to ourselves.

- Recovery and repair. Oops. You blew up, stomped out, abandoned or avoided dealing with something and your response to change leaked out onto someone else. This isn't a moral failure; it's a sign you didn't tend to overwhelm early enough (we're trained to ignore it) or the change outpaced your capacity. Own it, repair the damage, and learn the lesson: shore up your resources for next time.

- Extending compassion to others. You're seeing resistance, confusion, overwhelm, anger, frustration, or people-pleasing. Consider that change may be moving too fast or landing too hard. People may not be prepared, skilled, or able to cope. Curiosity is the key to care. Just as you need compassion when change outstrips your capacity, extend that same grace to others.

Questions for Reflection

- How am I resourcing myself? Do I have the capacity to respond to the level of change I am encountering? If not, what support, resources, or practices can I secure?
- What is my body telling me? Where in my body am I feeling this situation unfold?
- What story am I telling myself about being overwhelmed, confused, distracted, upset, or any other way I'm feeling as this situation unfolds?
- What am I seeing in other people in this situation? How might I be more curious and compassionate? What else might be happening?
- What am I resisting or trying to fix here? Where am I delaying my learning?

The Decision

A NEW PROMISE.

As I considered the 10 original promises, I felt something was missing: taking responsibility for how we show up within change. Molecular rearrangement is resource-intensive; it requires energy and capacity. The transformative change we encounter as we move beyond the familiar, take on big challenges, and step onto the path of justice requires not only awareness of how we are showing up, but deeper skill in holding, resourcing, and moving through change—individually and together.

We can learn to notice the clues that we are in the midst of change, recognize when its pace or scale demands more than we have, seek support, and show up with compassion for ourselves and others when grief, pain, or disruption leaks out, blows up, or shuts us down. This promise isn't about changing change, but about taking responsibility for how we meet it.

Why Is This Important Now?

I am writing from Minneapolis: eight blocks and just three months from "It's OK, I don't hate you," two miles from where a veteran-serving ICU nurse was executed on the last day of the year from the executive overreach that dismantled USAID and abruptly ended my career, and two blocks and nearly six years from "I can't breathe," where we say George Floyd's name every day as we navigate to school and the grocery store and the local coffee shop. I am writing in the wake of a school shooting six months ago, and a politically-motivated murder of an elected official and her husband just three months before that. I am writing through an erratic winter and a looming eviction crisis, and from the fog of COVID less than four years ago. I am writing from numbness and grief so deep that once tears start, they feel infinite.

But I am also writing from songs of resistance, from 1,000 people forming a giant butterfly on a winter-worn field, from neighbors sharing food, whistles, and their last $50 to help another family pay rent.

These times may be more and more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous than we have ever experienced. Each instance weighs on our bodies, our sense of safety, ever more out of reach. In these times it is easy to feel overwhelmed, off-center, disconnected, exhausted. Now, more than ever, we need to take care of ourselves and each other, bring tenderness to our tiredness, love to those crunchy interactions, grace to frustration.

Resources for Tending to Change

You are your best resource! Your body knows what it needs. Listen.

We are surrounded by resources that tend to change. Community. Spirituality. Art, music, poetry, dance. Friends and furry friends. Good food. Nature.

Some of the people I have been inspired by who think and write and practice in these spaces of embodied change (somatics), healing and cultural wellness, interconnectedness, and collective change include Nora Bateson, Dan Siegel, Louise Marra, and Tyson Yunkaporta. We have so many elders walking among us and wisdom in the collective to support our journey home to ourselves.

Conclusion

by *Jeff Paddock*

The *Sidekick Manifesto* had marketable success in part because it resonated with a specific audience. Folks like me, many of us early-to-mid-career Western do-gooders, found the sidekick metaphor relatable, easily snapping onto images of Batman and Robin in 2016, not knowing we were also repeating history.

Robin was the first "sidekick" introduced as an American DC comic book character in the 1940s specifically to appeal to younger audiences looking to be a part of a heroic fight. At the time the Manifesto was being written, international development was going through a reckoning following things like the uncoordinated response to the Haiti earthquake in 2010, documentaries like *Poverty, Inc.* (2014), and initiatives such as the Grand Bargain in 2016. I studied at the feet of reformed "heroes," saviors, and cowboys who'd built the first 50 years of humanitarian practices and informed me that those days were over. Those roles were gone. Anyone looking to further a mission they believed in had to reinvent their role in it. And exactly as some of us were asking ourselves what that looked like, along came this simple idea. With its iconography alone, the *Sidekick Manifesto* did a lot to repurpose the savior impulse inside budding do-gooders looking to join the fight.

But this revelatory period is behind us now—a decade behind. It enlivens me to read the chapters that make up the *Sidekick Manifesto II* with the voices of authors from the global Majority and those for whom "heroic" meant something different growing up. These voices, I think, are missing from the original work. Perhaps, as we decide what to do with the first *Sidekick Manifesto*, we ought to be willing to move beyond a US icon. Sure, the idea of Robin will always resonate with me as certain concepts guided phases of my career before I outgrew them as well. But it's hard to relate to someone from behind a mask.

I take real stock in what decisions this book makes in pursuit of maturity: three promises kept, seven reimagined, and one added. We're honing our way of working. After fighting poverty's symptoms and whittling away at diabolically entrenched inequity one dollar at a time, we still believe that change can no more be defined by money than poverty itself can.

Amy said it best when she wrote, "localization is sometimes presented as a technical shift... But on the ground, it's also emotional and relational." Grace echoed this sentiment by calling local relations the foundation of scale, intuiting that, as Laura put it, "the context is fundamental" to everything built in it. We've outgrown the simple dualism of Batman and Robin. We do not accept either worldview: one mandating a pure humanitarian imperative and one which says USAID qualified as waste, fraud, and abuse. Stuck in the fracas middle, there are those of us choosing to take "accountability as an act of collective care" with both views in mind, like Nikita, and "after listening and agreeing, actually changing" as Ann decides to do.

Emotions. Relations. Context. Creativity. Repair. Our utility belt may be professionalized, fitted with randomized controlled trials and the techno-power Mahrukh illuminated, but the *human skills*

written about by our contributors are what we're really working on now. This pedigree is built on bonds that these skills create. Susan's super-listener persona is akin to a new archetype.

I agree most with Santiago and Gunjan's assertion that the word "solidarity" may best sum up what we are striving toward. Iconography is hard to conjure for this, but exercising humanity across the local-global sphere is rarely iconographic to any one culture. So, if you're like me, picturing what solidarity *looks* like will define the next phase. It starts with disembarking from a plane, a shake of hands, a bow, or a kiss of cheeks, and then it begins.

And if you're also like me, solidarity doesn't necessarily mean you agree with every one of these pieces. I thought some lacked realism, others exuded defeatism, but not a single one was naïve. Every voice had already grappled with these nuances. And it makes me think, "damn, does this hard work of ours ever inspire me." Even leaving it. The fact that we may not all see development the same way is the literal point of why we've agreed to reform the *Sidekick Manifesto*. We're evolving, right now, in concert. So maybe it's time for something new.

By coincidence, DC Comics is retiring Robin's most recent character, Tim Drake, in 2026 after 37 years of graphic novels. Perhaps to honor Robin's service as an icon, we ought to applaud him into retirement. Some of us may indeed hang up our capes and turn to our own "local." Some of us will stay and change the fight. I'm not talking about abandoning this story, since Hasangani and Jason correctly assert that abandoning it does not suffice. What I suggest is peeling off the mask and leaving it on the podium—revealing our true identity to the world as fallible, imperfect people who try. Not super at all.

To Robin, unveiling himself may feel like "molecular rearrangement" the way Katrina described a change of identity. But he will always be a sidekick—that's a part of him forever—he's just choosing to mature, like us, to make a difference in a more refined way. (Ironically, the character is leaving for a second career in philanthropy.) The world needs that kind of honesty. It does not need superheroes or sidekicks. It needs humans united to face what's coming.

We're speeding away in our sidecar toward 2036. Local organizations and institutions are lighting the way by finding methods that successfully wield and process millions of dollars from larger ones. But the specters of historic colonialism and futurist technologies like AI have already started haunting us through the ruins of a global order fractured into geopolitical spheres and overshadowed by the dark clouds of climate change. The landscape through which development has to travel over the next ten years is fraught with forces that could just as easily end poverty as they could worsen it again.

I believe we should carry the *Sidekick Manifesto* as a living document. Because, at most, it's a reminder that none of us stand alone. We stand with people like us and unlike us, agreeing to debate and work, not as vigilantes, but in concert, alleviating suffering to the best of our respective abilities. Therefore, as I close with my own favorite note—that local leaders with local solutions to local problems will end poverty—I am reminded of Santi's insight that "local leadership matters, but it does not operate in isolation."

No one should have to do this alone.

I hope to gather again in 2036 to take stock of how we've come together. We've fought as Sidekicks for ten years, and I believe we will renew ourselves in Solidarity for ten more.

Acknowledgments

This book exists because a group of people said yes.

To the contributors: thank you for your trust, your honesty, and your willingness to write from the gray of nuance and complexity. Each chapter carries its own voice, its own tension, its own lived experience. I am grateful for the care you brought to your words.

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To Laura, Santi, and Jeff—you have been part of this work from the beginning. What started years ago as conversations in classrooms and in El Progreso, Honduras has grown into something far greater than we could have anticipated.

To my students who helped bring this manuscript to life through careful proofreading and attention to detail—Celeste Garcia, Kathryn Lewis, Kenzie Lotz, Calvin Martin, Kes Rodgers, Faris Sabit, Grace Slonaker, Fiona Steffens, and Hiba Subhi—thank you. This book is better because of your eyes, your patience, and your commitment to getting it right.

This project has always been about relationships. I am grateful for the relationships that stretch across time, geography, and experience that have resulted from our work together. Thank you. - shawn

Resources

For readers who wish to explore the ideas in this book more deeply, the following projects, experiences, and readings offer ways to continue reflecting on power, proximity, and the practice of humility.

Sidekick Manifesto
Essays, tools, and learning experiences exploring what it means to rethink help, power, and solidarity—and to live as a sidekick rather than a hero: sidekickmanifesto.org

Do-Goodernomics: A Merciless Market Analysis of Our Hero-Complex
A short but unsettling exploration of what happens when good intentions collide with scarcity, incentives, and the desire to be seen as helpful: sidekickmanifesto.org/do-goodernomics

The Mismatch Game
An interactive classroom and workshop game on scarcity, volatility, and the cost of being poor: sidekickmanifesto.org/mismatch

The Two Dollar Challenge
An experiential exercise inviting participants to live on two dollars a day and confront how we think about poverty, charity, and social change: twodollarchallenge.org

La Ceiba Microfinance
A long-term microfinance partnership that shaped many of the lessons behind the *Sidekick Manifesto*, particularly around agency, risk, humility, and unintended consequences: laceibamfi.org

About Shovel & Axe Press

Shovel & Axe Press is a small independent imprint founded by Shawn Humphrey.

The name reflects a tension at the heart of being human. A shovel plants a tree. An axe cuts one down. We embody both simultaneously.

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Football Is: What the Game Does to Us, For Us, Through Us

Do-Goodernomics: A Merciless Market Analysis of Our Hero-Complex

Future books, essays, and teaching tools will continue to appear through Shovel & Axe Press.

Learn more at shawnhumphrey.com/shovel-axe

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Listed in order of appearance

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Grace Boone is passionate about shifting power, community-led change, strengthening democracy, and reimagining a world that works for all of us. As a Program Manager at Essential Partners, she is applying her decade of network building and international peacebuilding to address the root challenges of polarization in her home country: the United States. When not working, you can find Grace printmaking in her little studio in Richmond, Virginia, or strolling with her partner, Will, and pup, Fawkes.

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Mahrukh (Maya) Hasan is the founder and CEO of Fearless, a global peer membership community for women of color who are social impact leaders. As a civil society leadership trainer, coach, and facilitator with 20+ years of experience across five continents, Maya has navigated power dynamics from both margins and center. She has trained 3,000+ leaders across 50+ countries, was a senior adviser at USAID, and developed curriculum taught in partnership with LSE and Harvard.

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Susan M. Davis brings heart and strategy to championing local changemakers. Early on, she found at WaterPartners International that locally-led initiatives created lasting water solutions that projects led by outsiders could never match. She eventually transformed from an outsider to an ally, as a Mama Hope and member of the Movement for Community Led Development. She advocates for others to do the same in her upcoming book, "Bullshit without Borders: Let's change the way we change the world."

Learn More: bullshitwithoutborders.org

Nikita Yasmin Shah is a decolonial practitioner, poet, and founder of Hyphen Poetry. Writing from her lived experience as a neurodivergent woman of the Global Majority, Nikita explores the somatic and systemic "tax" carried by those seeking transformational change. Her work is rooted in the belief that imagination is a prerequisite for liberation and that rest is a form of resistance. Currently, she is delivering *The Unfinished Shawl*, a multidisciplinary project exploring identity, belonging, and memory-keeping.

Learn More: hyphenpoetry.com

Hasangani (Hasi) Edema-Reynolds is a humanitarian professional and researcher whose work sits at the intersection of protection, gender equity, and shifting power across conflict-affected contexts in the Middle East, Asia, and beyond. She has navigated the aid system from both sides, as local staff in Sri Lanka and as international staff in Iraq and carries both perspectives into everything she writes. Her chapter grew out of ten years of sitting with the gap between good intentions and real impact and her learning journey continues.

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Katrina Mitchell is a strategist who has facilitated social change through community-led and community-engaged design, research and learning in radically rural places and with people who bring lived, cultural, technical, experiential and other kinds of wisdom to their work. She has founded multiple social ventures including Picture Impact, be Waste Wise, and a new venture focused on supporting change makers with their change making. She is adjunct faculty at University of San Diego in a transdisciplinary master's program on just transitions to sustainability. Raised by a radically awesome single mom and raising a strong-willed child of her own, she lives in Minneapolis with two cats, loads of plants, and when she's not writing or listening to whodunnit mysteries, you can find her singing in community.

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Jeff Paddock strongly believes in making decisions based on humanitarian values. He works at the American Red Cross as the focal point for Cash programs in Latin America and the Caribbean and previously as a response manager for the Chicago chapter. His free time is spent rock climbing, writing fiction, and volunteering for search and rescue teams.

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