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Democracy and education – a tale of two organizations

By Keely Brach
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The premise of democracy lies within the notion that all citizens are equal and that they have the right to make choices, articulate their views and choose their representatives without fear of persecution. However, for far too many individuals around the world the ability to fully contribute to, and participate in the democratic process is severely constrained by a lack of reading, writing and critical thinking skills.

This is a particularly debilitating reality for developing countries where literacy for developing countries where literacy rates are often well under 50 per cent and the transition to democracy still a work in progress.

Organizations such as CODE (a non-profit organization supporting literacy and education globally) understand the connection between literacy, education, and democracy. CODE and its country partners work to improve the quality of education in the developing world by building local publishing capacity, establishing libraries and supporting the professional development of teachers and librarians. Their affiliate CODE Incorporated works to supply electoral and voter registration materials needed for fair and open elections, while at the same time securing a revenue stream for CODE through its profits.

CODE + CODE Inc = Literacy and Democracy

Since 1959, CODE (formerly known as the Canadian Organization of Development through Education) has been an innovative non-governmental organization promoting literacy and education in the developing world.

In order to continue delivering its literacy programs, a sustainable resource of revenue was eventually needed. And so, in 1987, CODE created a for-profit organization known as CODE Incorporated or CODE Inc., an Ottawa-based organization (like CODE) that would hopefully guarantee that CODE's literacy programming would continue to get the financial support it needed.

CODE Inc. originally started out as a procurement and logistical firm, but eventually established itself as a key player in the niche market area of voter registration and electoral materials supply and delivery. By the early 1990s CODE Inc. had become a leader in the supply of ballot boxes, ballots, indelible ink, etc. – materials that helped individuals in the developing world engage in democratic and fair elections. Its unique business approach and ingrained social responsibility model soon helped to set it apart from its

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competition. Not only could CODE Inc. deliver a client's electoral needs, it could also help deliver education, by supporting CODE.

Fast forward to 2010. CODE Inc. is a leader in the elections materials industry and has worked in dozens of countries including Afghanistan, Iraq, Haiti, Sudan, and Kenya. However, electoral processes are moving away from the standard ballot and pencil. CODE Inc. soon identified an opportunity to offer an alternative to this traditional standard by developing a secure and robust Electronic Voter Registration (EVR) solution. The importance of transparency in elections in the developing world can't be stressed enough. CODE Digital Solutions, or CDS, is a multi-biometric system that uses fingerprint scanning and facial recognition software to help detect multiple voters in the system.

Last summer, carrying out a request from the Interim Independent Electoral Commission of Kenya, CODE Inc. completed an EVR solution for that country's constitutional referendum. Over a six-week registration period, approximately 1.5 million people voted using the CDS system. In many African countries, the democratic process is still just that – a process. A secure system like the CDS limits the ability for unfair or illegal voting. Every citizen's vote should count, but it should only count once. CODE Inc. and their CDS system helped ensure that.

The success in Kenya was an important milestone for CODE Inc. It is also an example of the double duty CODE Inc. performs in creating opportunities for CODE, the literacy organization, to deliver its programming in many of the same places CODE Inc. works.

While it was supporting democracy in Kenya by delivering a secure registration system for Kenyans, CODE Inc. was also funding what CODE and its partner, the National Book Development Council of Kenya were calling "Reading Kenya" – a comprehensive reading initiative that includes the sourcing of high quality reading materials, the refurbishing of libraries, and teaching and librarian training – all directed at improving the quality of learning in primary schools.

The work is beautifully complementary. CODE gives individuals a chance to acquire the hard skills of reading and writing while becoming independent, lifelong learners. CODE Inc. ensures that individuals equipped with these skills will get a fair vote that will be democratic and, above all, will count.

For more information please view www.codeinc.com.

Main Street

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As one father described the services his daughter receives, "the approach is disciplined, structured and centred on achieving specific targets and goals while maintaining a friendly and loving approach. This allows her to fully express freely while being with other children, gives her a place to learn and a chance to develop many new skills."

The compelling stories from parents who were, in their words, "rescued" by Main Street are a testament to the impact that this therapeutic approach has on children and their families dealing with so

many issues.

With testimonies like this and so many others, it is no wonder that Main Street wants to expand to support the need of a community. They are hoping to rally an entire city behind them.

If you would like to support Main Street Community Services and the hundreds of children and youth in our community in need of a "Place of Our Own" simply go to www.avivacommunityfund.org/ideas/acf5532, register and on Dec. 2 begin casting your vote each day.

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