



Business

Entrepreneurs are 'In the River'

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A Sufi Master once told his disciples about the different levels of knowledge. "There are different ways to know a river," he began. First, you can read books about it and learn its length, its source, its depth, its width, the power of its current, the types of fish it contains, and other tangible facts. Then you can undertake the long journey to see it. You invest time, money and hardships to travel to that river so that you can one day sit on its shores and look at it. When that day comes, you have attained a greater level of knowledge because you know its smell, you feel the sand that borders it, and you watch the birds that play over it. Finally, at last, you take off your clothes, and dive in to swim the river. You feel its current along your body, the gradients of temperature, how deep it is. You taste something of it. You wonder if you have the strength to swim its length.



FAIRBANKS. the development divide between Western nations and the developing world. is widening

In the words of Thomas Sowell, the African-American sociologist: "We need to confront the most blatant fact that has persisted across centuries of social history - vast differences in productivity among peoples, and the economic and other consequences of such differences."

Sadly, the development divide between Western nations and the developing world, with the exceptions of parts of China and India, is widening. One consequence of this fact is that millions of desperate people around the world are ready to brave the dangers of illegal immigration to richer countries to escape the threat of poverty at home. Another is that millions of disgruntled youths, with no prospects for employment and the decent life it could sustain, become easy prey for the fringe elements of poor societies.

We must also acknowledge that during the past fifty years, the collective record in international assistance to least developed countries has been disappointing. This has been well documented by Jeffrey Sachs, Dambisa Moyo and William Easterly. One reason for this has to do with the mindsets with which development practitioners engage the very people they are trying to assist.

Economics-based abstractions originated in the metropolises of Europe and North America have done little to help.

The Pioneers of Prosperity project is the antithesis to the search for solutions in the next big theory of global poverty. It creates a platform for leaders in business throughout the Caribbean and the rest of the world, who have witnessed the complexity of creating prosperity in poor countries. It helps to tell the story of change in the microcosms of emerging industries and businesses. Below are four examples, chosen at random, from our ten outstanding finalists: Analytical Technologies (ATL) is located at the hub of the petrochemicals industry of Trinidad, and is the only private industrial laboratory in that country.

The firm competes with the government laboratory and indirectly with the in-house laboratories of major petrochemical corporations. In addition to offering faster response times than the government laboratory, ATL has developed proprietary processes and possesses technological instruments that are not available anywhere else in Trinidad.

Alternative Insurance Company (AIC) has a portfolio that includes automobile, health, commercial, homeowners and life insurance products, as well as micro-insurance and funeral insurance aimed at Haitians earning less than US\$4 a day. AIC's competitive advantage comes from intimate knowledge of their customers based on detailed market research and direct interaction, rather than working through brokers. Its well-trained staff designs innovative products to meet the customers' specific needs, which are then distributed through AIC's network of strategic partners, including a major bank, a micro-loan organisation and a bank focused on micro-entrepreneurs.

As these leaders' successes reveal, eradicating poverty will not lend itself, simply, to a generic list of good policy measures that make regions and peoples better off. The answers, they teach us, are more likely to be found in a heretical mix of economic and management theory, business strategy and practice, rational risk taking, and that most precious of human activities, integrative thinking.

A common theme that emerges from these entrepreneurs' experiences is that prevailing local mentalities and ways of life have been under-integrated in the discussion of economic growth. Development programmes that do not draw from local knowledge to refine their global perspective fail to contribute to sustainable solutions. The Pioneers of Prosperity project, in great part, is about what it means to look into the wisdom of the localities in order to find answers to the world's greatest challenges. It is about non-traditional solutions that are hard to measure, and from the bottom up.

For example, Spatial Innovision, out of Jamaica, provides spatial data services to over one hundred government agencies, non-government organisations and private businesses. Spatial has been an advocate for the widespread implementation of GPS (Global Positioning Solutions) systems throughout the Caribbean, and has won competitive bids issued by leading international technology firms. The firm also invests in professional development and organisational effectiveness through 360-degree feedback, and provides at least one international training per employee each year.

Most wood-related production and export in Guyana focuses on cutting and exporting raw material from Guyana's rich rain forests, while Bulkan Timber Works (BTW) has focused on

developing a sustainably harvested, value-added export product. BTW takes the logs and saws them into lumber that is air- or kiln-dried, decreasing warping and significantly adding value to the lumber. BTW then turns the dried lumber into various building products. BTW pays significantly higher wages (up to double) than the government mandated minimum wages for the timber industry, and employees work their way up through an apprenticeship model, based on how fast they learn.

These businessmen and women bring diverse perspectives, cultures and voices to their work. They are all highly motivated professionals with backgrounds that span a wide spectrum of social, ethnic, religious, and geographic affiliations. Most of all, they are field-tested entrepreneurs who confront, problem-solve, and in many instances overcome the most blatant fact, everyday of their lives.

That Sufi Master taught us about the different levels of knowledge, the "different ways to know a river". One can learn its length, its source, its depth, its width, the power of its current, and the fish it contains. One can take the long journey to see it, invest time, money, and hardships to travel to that river to sit on its shores and look at it, know its smell, feel the sand that borders it, and watch the birds that play over it. These entrepreneurs whom we honour this week took off their clothes, and dove in to swim it. They felt its current along their bodies, the gradients of temperature, how cold it is. They tasted something of it. They wondered, briefly, if they had the strength to swim its length, and now they know.

The Sufi told us that swimming gives the highest level of knowledge a man or woman can ever have of that river. It is the type of experiential knowledge no words can ever convey to those who do not wish to share it.

So it goes with every thing worth knowing. If the course of human history is a river, these entrepreneurs will never be satisfied to stand along its banks.

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