

Building Trust and Social Sustainability by Tim Dutton

I'm going to talk about sustainability, but first, let's go to Haiti.

There was a tremendous noise coming from the courtyard in front of the hospital. Shouting, swearing, and the general din of an angry crowd wafted through my open window. I was in bed, sick with malaria. As administrator of the only hospital for miles around, though, I was responsible for anything that happened there.

I ran down to the courtyard, where a group of young men from the local town of Deschapelles had assembled. They were not only angry but armed – ropes, sticks, and various other improvised weapons were being brandished at the front door of the hospital.

Against all common sense, I put myself between the crowd and the object of their anger. I came to find out that it was Ti Jean-Claude, a local *attaché*. *Attachés* were notorious symbols of the military regime. They were the paid henchmen in every community who intimidated and roughed up people that the military government deemed troublemakers. As you might imagine, they were not well-liked. Once the Americans invaded and the military government disappeared, these henchmen were sitting ducks for angry mobs like this one.

Thinking back, it is remarkable that the crowd paused long enough to tell me what was happening. What is more remarkable, however, is that they disbursed. Peacefully and without bloodshed, these angry young men agreed to wait for a higher justice for this *attaché*. How did this happen? Trust.

What I have not told you yet is that I knew the names of almost everyone in that crowd – not only their names, but much more. I had built relationships with them and their families in my years as the hospital administrator. When I faced them now as an angry mob, their trust for me – a trust that I would do the right thing and see

that justice is done – saved the sanctity of the hospital. Because they trusted me, the hospital was left in peace during this tumultuous time.

There are people in this world like Ti Jean-Claude – the bad guys, the villains, or the evil-doers. Sometimes they get away; Ti Jean-Claude did that day, only to face justice later, but what is comforting is that there will always be trust and ways to build trust – and trust is powerful.

What does trust and this story about an angry mob in Haiti have to do with sustainability? There are traditionally three pieces to sustainability: people, planet, and prosperity. The one that I am most passionate about and that SCOPE (Sarasota County Openly Plans for Excellence) works to strengthen is the social aspect of sustainability. Not that the others are not important. The beauty of a concept like sustainability is that it is win-win. Enhancing one area of the world – the natural environment, for example – has positive consequences for the rest of the areas of sustainability.

But what does social sustainability look like? I would submit that it looks the same in Deschapelles, Haiti as it does in Sarasota County, Florida. This covers a lot of ground – safety, education, government, health, civic life, recreation... The list goes on. But at the core of social sustainability is trust. With trust, we can let go of the positionalism and embrace community. We can see



people as people and not just opposing perspectives. We can operate in a win-win mentality instead of zero-sum gain.

Trust can overcome the worst the world has to offer – injustice, isolation, poverty, and even Ti Jean-Claude. Research shows that communities whose residents are more connected and have higher levels of trust have good things happening. What kinds of good things? Less crime, higher test scores in schools, lower rates of heart disease, and even fewer colds. We can all be part of creating a more socially sustainable world. The best place to start is right where you are.

Tim Dutton is the executive director of SCOPE, a non-profit organization that engages people in improving the quality of life. Before coming to the Sarasota County community, he spent years as the administrator of Hôpital Albert Schwietzer in Deschapelles, Haiti. Read more about SCOPE at www.scopexcel.org.



Start strengthening your community now to help build relationships and trust:

- Organize a social gathering to welcome a new neighbor
- Greet people
- Give your park a weatherproof chess/checkers board
- Join or start a babysitting cooperative
- Eat breakfast at a local gathering spot on Saturdays
- Turn off the TV and talk with friends or family
- Sign up for a class and meet your classmates
- Open the door for someone who has his or her hands full
- Sing in a choir
- Offer to serve on a committee
- Fix it even if you didn't break it
- Pick it up even if you didn't drop it