

*Leading Change Together: A Pitch for Education, Community Engagement, Social Justice, and Sustainable Development*

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**Abstract**

Leading Change Together is the powerful idea of impact behind the mission of Global Tassels, a registered 501(c)3 international organization focused on alleviating poverty in the most severely-impacted communities around the world. Global Tassels' signature mission is to provide access to a college education with the goal of permanently empowering the sustainable development of such local communities. Our transformational model is derived from a chain of transactions, beginning with our students' passion for change, and culminating in the full commitment of their local community organizations to provide sustainable, poverty-reduction programs for the benefit of the people they serve.

The importance of college and university involvement, investment and participation are highlighted with individuals and community organizations from Haiti, Colombia, Ivory Coast, India, Guatemala and the Philippines. We believe that providing free undergraduate college education to the Student-Leaders is a commitment that colleges and universities must make—a positive and sustainable educational initiative and a form of social justice.

Our goal is to have students involved in academic leadership, openness to college-ready activities and an action oriented toward community engagement. These interactions will play roles in developing and supporting a new generation of talents around the world. Thus, our organizing principles of education, empowerment and engagement—taken together—comprise the means to transform daily lives for the residents of severely impacted communities around the worlds

Keywords: social justice, poverty, community engagement, sustainable development, Student-Leaders

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## **Education with a Purpose**

One can argue that education is known as the core of life's livelihood and longevity. It [education] has been the backbone of any individual's social, economic, and political identities. It is the only gift that keeps on giving when it is attained and used as a way to contribute back to our society. But, education has not been in the frontline of opportunity for many. Historically, education has played a role on reimagining a child's future but education has also been an age-old problem for millions of disadvantaged families around the world. Access to education is not as easy as many would think. For example, in a society where there are political instabilities, those who govern can indirectly reject education for millions of children. Places where war and conflict can displace families from where they live which in essence takes away children's chances to receive education for a very long time. UNICEF (2014) reminds us that, "the world's low-income countries remain home to concentrations of poverty and disadvantage, but many impoverished children live in middle-income countries – countries plagued with large income inequalities."

In addition, where people live in this world can have a major influence on access, affordability, and the quality of learning. Millions of people are living in dire communities around the world. Some are in remote places that prevent them from having the prominent access to go to school. In many slum communities, where poverty is highly visible, children are often cheated from getting a safe and affordable learning environment. According to, Better Care Network, "research findings reveal that poverty is a major underlying cause of children being received into institutional care and that such reception into care is a costly, inappropriate, and often harmful response to adverse economic circumstances" (Greenberg & Williamson, 2010). Having an education is key to a successful future but the truth is an education with a purpose is a fruitful manifestation of success if it is pass from one generation to the next.

What do we mean? Education must start from when a child is at the primary stages of childhood development all the way to his or her adult life. It is an algorithm whereas if invested correctly, the level of success for that particular child is known to be higher than those who are taken out of the educational pathway during these years. An education with a purpose comes with a passion, not just for the individual but also for others. Herein, the "purpose" does not have to be specific but it must be an act of kindness and a form of giving back where it can positively impact people's livelihood and surrounding environment.

## **Background on Project**

In 2014, we were both involved in the founding of a new organization with hopes to take on the challenges on access to education for those students living in poverty areas around the world. We called it, Global Tassels<sup>1</sup> [GT in short]. The transformational model is derived from a chain of transactions, beginning with our future students' passion for

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<sup>1</sup> NOTE: For more information about Global Tassels, please visit the organization's official website [www.globaltassels.org](http://www.globaltassels.org).

change, and culminating in the full commitment of their local community organizations to provide sustainable poverty-reduction programs to benefit the locals they serve. We had the opportunity to lead our operations and capacity building work in countries like India, The Philippines, Haiti, Côte d'Ivoire, Colombia, Guatemala, and Kenya. But something striking happened in the summer of 2015, during our first visit to Kenya. The trip to Wangige at the Caroline Mungai Foundation Orphanage Home and School was a visit of a lifetime and a life changing one. It was the most inspiring and eye opening experience where everything validated our true passion in education and community work – hence the work we do in GT.

To us, the problem became clear. After visiting a few orphanages in cities like New Delhi, Port-Au-Prince, Wangige, or those in the rural areas of Guatemala City – there seems to be one similar issue with the young adolescents living in orphanages. We found that those who soon will turn 16-18 years of age are deemed to be “aged-out”– to some countries when an orphan becomes an adult, their time at the home will end and they are required in many ways to start a new “adult” life hoping that they have acquired enough skills not just as an individual but for most, to start a family. During our visits, we found it interesting that most of the founders of these homes did not have any strategic plans to address this. For us, we found it as a concern but no one seems to “figure it out” as of yet. We are quite aware of the different situations these orphanages are in and how limited their budgets are. SOS Villages (2008) states,

“The best place for children’s emotional and physical well-being is within a family, where they can live their childhood to the fullest and prepare for a future where they can realize their potential. However, the number of children that do not grow up in a caring family environment is increasing. Their deteriorating living conditions and the lack of support extended to them are cause for great concern. The international community, governments, civil society, and local communities have a duty to support the world’s most vulnerable children and their families, to ensure that children become strong, emotionally stable and self reliant.”

The leaderships of orphanages are often members of the community church. Some are individuals who see the needs of their own neighborhoods and some are individuals in the diaspora who just want to make their home country a better place. In fact, I learned to understand how hard it is for them to take ownership of such responsibilities that would require a lifetime commitment. Their daily operations ranges from maintaining the facilities to making sure the kids have the resources they have for school; from hiring trustable staff who will ultimately give their heart out to work as parents of the kids to making decision on whether or not to admit another child to the home; from keeping the health and safety of the children to desperately finding support from individual or corporations who are willing to give financial contributions. In fact, this is the reason why we also implemented PROJECT KIN (Kids In Need), a project focus on the needs of the orphanage. If we start the intervention early, we feel that we can work and volunteer with the different orphanages contribute to the success of the child. In fact, “all evidence

suggests that direct-care volunteering does not reduce the risks of orphanages, but heightens them” (IAIM, 2015).

During our visitations, our partners ventured on with some dialogues that perhaps young adult orphans may qualify for vocational trainings and a number of kids might be equipped enough with the right skill sets that would get them enrolled in a program like Global Tassels. However, that is not always the case. Without any pathway programs for these young adults to go to college, we are concerned that their future and vulnerabilities, they might end up in the black hole of poverty in the streets. The organization feels very strongly to impose our service work with organizations and educational institutions to assist them in some areas.

- (1) Strategic Planning: Without pursuing an internal strategic plan by the orphanage’s leadership we strongly believe that we would lose the very core mission and hard work of these orphanages around the world –a mission which is invested in the education of their children – and an investment that should be supported throughout the child’s higher education experience and thereafter. With our partners we plan to infuse the resources and training as early as possible. To provide activities which are focused on leadership development, good manners, skills and language trainings and so on.
- (2) Resource Support: Through our Good Will Projects and via GT Volunteer Corp, we hope to launch a program where we can serve the communities, home, local schools, and orphanages in our countries. This can range from building classrooms to assisting in beatification projects to provide new energy for kids by having a safe, healthy, and accessible learning environment. Our goal in the future is to maintain and enhance these mini projects to bigger one with hopes that it can grandfather into one of our Student Leader’s Project – a two-year project commitment geared to poverty reduction post graduation.
- (3) Policy Lobbying: We also want to be a member voice with the leadership of our partners. Therefore, we will continue working with them to promote and lobby for opportunities for their kids. For instance, we are currently working with local Universities in the cities where we work to think about scholarship programs for those kids with academic and leadership potentials. We also realize that government agencies do not fund orphanages, hence this why they exist. Orphanages became a call for action for the inconsistencies of government system, especially in the developing world. Over the years, they became the answer to many sets of complex problems. UNICEF plays a leading role with educational policies for children. They are the frontline for advocacies for instance when the Nepal Earthquake happened, it became apparent that there were no transparencies between the people and agencies. UNICEF (2015) states, “The issue then arises in having the developing world’s voice be heard, since they do not have the same resources to offer as the developed states. These states are able to use their resources to enact policies that favor their own interests rather than follow policies and suggestions of the developing world...” – as partners, we hope that we at Global Tassels can also be a voice to our partner organizations.

Wouldn't it be a tremendous assistance for these orphanages if they know that once their eldest kids complete secondary education that they have a safe haven? – *a safe haven in higher education which will qualify them to be more competitive in the job market.* Wouldn't it be only fair for public and private institutions in those communities to provide some funding and opportunities to these orphanages after they have invested to raise children out of the dangers of the streets? – *funding support to further the kids education to be responsible educated adults will be impactful.* Wouldn't the early financial supporters of these kids whether local or someone international be happier to know that the money they invested to raise these kids and to get them to become a better person are worth every penny because they have a future after living in the home? – *this is a gift that keeps on giving.*

*Leading Change Together* is the powerful idea of impact behind the mission of Global Tassels, we are a registered 501(c)3 international organization focused on alleviating poverty in the most severely- impacted communities around the world . Our signature mission is to provide access to college education with the goal of permanently empowering the sustainable development of such local communities.

## **Sustainable Development**

At the end of 2015, the United Nations ended their 15-year global projects to combat poverty called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which started in 2000. The UN reported successful achievements and continued challenges to battle and eradicate extreme poverty. Because there are still a lot of work to be done, the MDGs transformed to the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which is a plan of action for another 15 years (2015-2030) for the UN, non-governmental organizations, governments, businesses, community organizations, and individuals to continue, implement, and achieve new goals, all 17 of them.

We believe that forming Global Tassels in 2014 and aligning its mission to serve, as one organization under the bigger umbrella of the SDGs, will provide us with the opportunity to contribute to a bigger purpose. Although there are many areas that we feel we can tap on in regards to the 17 areas, our central commitment is in Goal 4: Quality Education. Below are the exact target points of the new Sustainable Development Goals #4, *Ensuring inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all:*<sup>2</sup>

### **TARGETS**

4.1: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes

4.2: By 2030, ensure that all girls and boys have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education so that they are ready for primary education

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<sup>2</sup> NOTE: For more information about the Sustainable Development Goals, please visit: [www.sustainabledevelopment.un.org](http://www.sustainabledevelopment.un.org)

- 4.3: By 2030, ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable and quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university
- 4.4: By 2030, substantially increase the number of youth and adults who have relevant skills, including technical and vocational skills, for employment, decent jobs and entrepreneurship
- 4.5: By 2030, eliminate gender disparities in education and ensure equal access to all levels of education and vocational training for the vulnerable, including persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples and children in vulnerable situations
- 4.6: By 2030, ensure that all youth and a substantial proportion of adults, both men and women, achieve literacy and numeracy
- 4.7: By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development
- 4.a: Build and upgrade education facilities that are child, disability and gender sensitive and provide safe, non-violent, inclusive and effective learning environments for all
- 4.b: By 2020, substantially expand globally the number of scholarships available to developing countries, in particular least developed countries, small island developing States and African countries, for enrolment in higher education, including vocational training and information and communications technology, technical, engineering and scientific programmes, in developed countries and other developing countries
- 4.c: By 2030, substantially increase the supply of qualified teachers, including through international cooperation for teacher training in developing countries, especially least developed countries and small island developing States

As seen here, the goals can be viewed as a guide to many organizations like Global Tassels. It has an alignment to our mission in regards to education from the primary level to higher education. It has a focus on children, adolescents, and young adults. And moreover, the goals can be used to create a benchmark for measuring outcomes.

## **Social Justice**

The connection between social justice and education is one that seeks to connect the two concepts in one common definition. Social justice finds, at its core, pillars of equity, access, and inclusion for all citizens. In our modern world, poor communities and those of color have suffered from the lack of these values. It is not enough to bring all members of society onto equal footing; rather, it is of utmost importance to get at the root cause of these inequities. Only then can social justice result in a citizenry poised to tackle the work that lays ahead of them. Education regarding social justice needs to include the analysis of multilevel components of oppression-the individual, cultural, and institutional (Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004). By knowing the root causes of inequities at these levels, the specific biases and disconnects can be explored and resolved. Einfield and

Collins (2008) discovered that equality and empowerment were central themes when discussing social justice.

They noted that there was a range of attitudes regarding equality that spanned the continuum of a general belief in the presence of equal rights to understandings of the pervasive systemic inequality in society. Often, citizens' beliefs in their abilities to enact changes were challenged; thus, social justice education must also have provided students with the power and skills needed to be the change agents and champions of equality (Adams, 2007). If the goal is to educate citizens for social justice, then one must carefully examine how one shapes educational experiences to foster a sense of empowerment and commitment in students to work for social justice. The thirst for social justice cannot be slaked with just knowing where the problems lie; rather, it can be quenched with one sip of social action at a time. After a few sips, the nectar of social change can be fully realized.

### **Civic Engagement**

Monard-Weissman (2003) states that a commitment to social justice involves an individual actively working toward equality for all society. How that work can be accomplished is not relegated to one route alone. There are several paths that can bring about social justice. These paths involve, among other work, advocacy, social and legal action, community organizing, and education (<http://animatingdemocracy.org/>). To be aware of the social injustices and then to be able to address those inequities requires individuals to witness the inequalities first-hand. These experiential education opportunities provide concrete and practical experiences that empower citizens with the realizations that they can make differences in the world (Einfield & Collins, 2008). They should also be a medium for pursuing democratic ideals of justice and equality in a pluralistic society (Hurtado, 2007). In this quest for parity, societal members have the agency to become civically engaged in their communities to improve the human condition. Thus, an engaged citizenry leads to the promotion of an open democracy (Curtis, 2012).

Civic engagement refers to the ways in which citizens can engage in the democratic process through civic, community, and political aspects of their lives (The Alliance for Strong Families and Communities, 2016). It also can result in learners' personal growth and provide the foundation needed to contribute to a more equitable and just society (Closson & Mullins Nelson, 2009). Previous research has revealed that the outcomes of civic engagement include the building of self-esteem and personal efficacy in individuals, as well as inducing social responsibility and civic mindedness (Kezar & Rhoads, 2001). By linking students' experiential education with a community, personal development and tolerance is fostered (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Civic engagement through collective problem solving can create lasting positive changes in communities (McGarvey, 2004). These skills and dispositions can prime citizens to meet their communities needs head on with specific projects and undertakings in mind. Thus, by working with community members, citizens gain multiple perspectives and multiple solutions to address the work at hand.

## **Civic Engagement & Social Justice**

Civic engagement can be a structure for community-based learning that is collaborative in intent and sensitive to local needs (Boyle-Baise, 2002). It allows for citizens to understand local issues from differing perspectives, especially from those who may be marginalized or disenfranchised in society. When considering that individuals need to feel they have the agency to enact changes in their own communities, civic engagement can provide the vehicle by which social justice AND community action can both be addressed simultaneously. Education can provide learners with the knowledge and skills needed to develop such projects and social action (Comber, 2014). Through the lens of education, citizens can transform themselves from passive to active participants in the arena of social justice reform.

Global Tassels, Inc. provides post-secondary education to students living in impoverished circumstances who seek to improve the conditions of their communities through social action. This unique requirement allows the organization to identify future scholar leaders who seek to identify and address issues of need in the places where they live. The students enter into their schooling with a social justice project in mind that will be executed after they graduate from college. This focus on a project is identified as a key factor in a successful student experience. Through education, the skills, knowledge, and dispositions required to put this two-year project into action will be acquired by the student leader throughout the educational process. Moreover, the leader scholar will have opportunities to become engaged in the various communities through volunteerism, internships, and other forum both in the United States and in the countries where they live. These components of civic engagement will allow the scholar leader unique opportunities to address issues of social justice that are important to them and their communities. They will be able to put their theoretical learning into practice while being supported by Global Tassels throughout the entire educational experience. By working with one scholar at a time, Global Tassels impact is magnified in the work that each student leader is able to do within their communities. This model of education can manifest the goals put forth by the UN Sustainable Goal #4 and simultaneously fosters scholar leaders and builds human capacity in communities. These are important goals to achieve when ending poverty in these communities.

It is difficult to commit to social justice without a local affect in mind. There needs to be a focused outcome desired to address a specific issue. Citizens require the knowledge and practical experience to put their social action into play. Formal, informal, and practical education can provide these components to the learner. Post-secondary schooling, coupled with experiential education, can allow students to meld together grounded theoretical information and the hands-on constructs of an existing community action mechanism. An educational pathway that can allow such a supported construct can effectively teach learners WHY and HOW to enact change in their own communities. Such a pathway can achieve tangible and lasting results.



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