

# Sustainability? How Do We Get There?

*Make the world a bigger place for a Deaf or Hard of Hearing Child* ©

*by Joanne Travers, Founder/President Partners for A Greater Voice, Inc.*

## Mission Work: Considerations for Building Sustainability:

- Assess and identify priority needs..
- Be an empathetic listener!
- Identify Change Agents within a community and develop their leadership abilities.
- Partner with culturally sensitive experts that can help you reach specific goals and objectives.
- Incrementally transfer knowledge based on the mentality and culture of the people.
- Provide deep learning experiences that invoke a vision of possibility and good outcomes.
- Empower the people you partner with and hold them accountable.
- Work with Community Based Rehabilitation programs.
- Educate and include parents as partners in your training initiatives.
- Foster progress by motivating people: money, knowledge, good outcomes, rewarding experiences, a vision of hope.
- Encourage the people you work with to obtain local financing. Support grant writing until someone can spearhead this work.
- Follow through.

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Daniel Bassett states, "Without consistent funding, programs start and then stop. People become overworked and stressed, and many don't stay in their jobs for very long". While this is true, the definition of *Sustainability* goes well beyond consistent revenue streams.

Sustainability is a broad term; it's the buzzword for environmentalists as they develop renewable energy across the globe. Sustainability is a word used by social entrepreneurs and micro financiers in the development of a product or business that inspires and invokes progress. Developing sustainable hearing health, education, and habilitation for deaf and hard of hearing children means something different however. It demands considerable attention, requires collaboration, and involves more than just the dispensing of hearing aids.

Working in resource poor communities for over twelve years, Partners for A Greater Voice fosters hearing health and habilitation practice for deaf children learning to listen and talk. Our work aims to improve social, emotional and cognitive development of children with hearing loss. We build capacity through education, collaborating with communities, schools, families. More than thirty missions involved sixty-five volunteers, and which has inspired dozens of educational programs for kids.

When I envision a school for the deaf in a low resource community (when there is one) I see square walls, rows of chairs and perhaps 50 students vying to get a glimpse at the teacher. I see limited books and curriculum, few artifacts, and no educational materials on walls. There is one teacher, and I fear that children aren't learning anything at all. I

want this dream to end!

Preparing these children for a better, richer future means building programs that transform my bad dream. I want to shift the paradigm toward hearing health practice that embraces better education environments, and which improves a child's social, emotional, cognitive development regardless of the degree of hearing loss or communication methodology.

Let's consider the hearing aid. Often times, uninformed parents and teachers have a false sense of hope regarding hearing technology. Far too many think a hearing aid will immediately solve a child's problem. If they wear one, then they should learn to talk. But they don't. What advantage does the child gain? We know that language is a higher order event of the brain, and listening with a hearing aid (or a cochlear implant devise) is far more complex. Auditory structures in the brain begin in the womb. When a child is born with hearing loss, and if their brain does not receive access to sound or speech signals, the occipital lobe takes over. A visual approach to developing language is the option. But, if hearing aids are used as a tool to facilitate listening and spoken language, and if parents and teachers believe a hearing aid helps a child talk, then humanitarians in hearing health must include auditory development and oral/verbal education on their mission agendas.

Because low resource countries often depend on humanitarians with expertise and transferrable resources, missions should include a sensitive and careful assessment of the realities within a community. It starts by learning about available re-



*Supporting parents and teachers in the Dominican Republic.*

sources, understanding the culture, building resilience, embracing the mentality and the capacity for learning about hearing health and education for the deaf. Understanding priority needs also involves the child's caregiver and family. Programs evolve only as fast as people are able to learn and respond, and success is often based on meaningful learning experiences given to community leaders and a select group of change agents.

Oral/verbal habilitation is a process that must involve audiologists, parents and teachers. Sustainable and comprehensive programs for children requires humanitarian initiative, devotion and resources. It involves working collaboratively, with parents and teachers, toward a common goal of improving social, emotional, and language outcomes of a child. When we believe in the potential of a deaf or hard of hearing child, we can go far. ♦

*Partners for A Greater Voice is incorporated as a 501c3 to train and educate teachers and parents vested in supporting and educating a child with disabling hearing impairment.*

*Joanne Travers is also an Officer of Coalition for Global Hearing Health: /coalitionforglobalhearinghealth.org*