

Cultures of DiGNiTY are possible:

Lessons on how to build
organizations that respect
humans

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Executive Summary

Dignity matters all around the world. The structures of aid produce disrespectful relations and processes. Even when people living in poverty are able to access the material aid they need, they frequently leave these interactions feeling unseen, unheard and maltreated.

Across the development sector, leaders tell us they want to respect the dignity of those they serve.

Yet we know that dignity can feel a vague topic. Some of these leaders tell us they are not sure how to get to grips with it. Others have said they worry that pursuing dignity will come at a cost to effectiveness.

To help address these concerns, we profiled five organizations that have worked hard to build dignity into their internal cultures. All are on a journey of constantly reinforcing that value, and we feel we have much to learn from their efforts.

The five are: Goonj, Partners in Health, All Together in Dignity Fourth World, Tostan and GiveDirectly

We take away six common lessons from this work:

- 1. It's not what you do - it's how you do it.** Respectful aid can be done at scale, but that brings real risks of dilution, and you've got to constantly reinforce your culture. Goonj's second hand clothing donations might not be what we'd normally think of as respectful but they are getting it done in 27 Indian states.
- 2. Dignity takes many years.** Tostan commits to three years in communities; Partners in Health signed a 25 year MOU with the Liberian government. The time matters in itself, and because it allows you to build mechanisms of participation, feedback, and properly train genuinely grounded staff.
- 3. Taking that much time required all these organizations to resist donor pressure** - donor staff may care personally about this agenda, but they are constrained by their structures. All five organizations conceive themselves as humble challengers to the aid (and sometimes capitalist) status quo.
- 4. The ultimate focus has to be on the individual you are serving** - but to achieve that requires careful internal culture setting and equitable policies and structures.

5. **Dignity isn't just about words.** You can't ever divorce it from politics and economics. There is no respectful care if you don't have the right medicines in stock. Still, language matters a lot.
6. **Dignity is essential, but there are complicated tensions to navigate** - you can't provide everything and you have to liaise with governments. Sometimes you are trying to change social norms to ensure one group's dignity is protected, and in doing so challenging existing power structures and traditions in ways that may feel disrespectful to some.

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“Dignity is not something that someone can give to someone. Every single person on this earth, whether you are born in a financially poor family, or a financially rich family, or whatever community, color, or geography, each of us is actually born with dignity. Because that's inbuilt. That's given. Now, the society can only do two things. Either it can respect dignity, or it can snatch dignity.”

- Anshu Gupta, co-founder of Goonj



Case studies

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“[Paul Farmer told me on my first day in Haiti:] ‘Cate, please go around to every facility that...we are helping to run in the rural central plateau of Haiti. And please document each bed that does not look outside to a window that does not have the ability to see beauty. How are we going to change that? And how are you personally going to change that?’

So some of my first days were spent taking pictures of patients, getting them on the walls, putting up Haitian art on the walls of the hospitals, moving beds around so that every bed had a view of a window, helping to set up a gardening committee so that we could we could have, you know, fish ponds and trees and plants and beauty.

...Why should a public hospital in rural Haiti be a sterile unwelcoming environment? Why shouldn't it be a place that you would want to heal him and healing isn't just medical, it's also your surroundings and how you're treated.

...And so to this day, it's not always the biggest line in our budget, of course, because there's so many priorities, but we have a dignification line.”

- Cate Oswald, Chief Policy and Partnership Officer at Partners in Health



*A symbiosis beyond giver
and receiver in India*

For Goonj, dignity exists in all human beings no matter their socioeconomic status, and can't be given. Society can only choose to respect or disrespect that dignity. According to Meenakshi, one of the co-founder of Goonj "when you tell a person that you're poor, you are getting the person to think about himself in less value." Employing a clear unconditional definition has helped Goonj reinforce a culture of dignity, even in a huge organization - they now operate in 27 Indian states, reaching many millions of people.

Goonj's largest program redistributes used clothing from wealthier cities to poorer ones. Behind this simple premise lies a wealth of thinking about dignity. Its founders emphasize the mutual interdependence of the two people in this exchange, in which the giver is never superior. Goonj's 2020-2021 annual report explains "Since its inception, Goonj has focused on building an equitable relationship of strength, sustenance and dignity between the resourceful and the resourceless." Their main program begins with a community engaging in useful work, chosen by that community, through which they can earn a package of clothing - this they call 'Dignity for Work'. The clothes are beautifully packaged and chosen for their high quality, out of respect for the dignity of the recipient - and out of respect for the materials themselves. Clad in better clothes, Goonj feels people are in turn more likely to be treated in a way that respects their dignity. Goonj's language of reciprocity and dignity reflects these beliefs.

Other Goonj programs focus on the provision of aid in disasters, water access, local infrastructure, education, livelihoods, sanitation, menstrual health and environmental protection. Goonj's progress with this work is reported in monthly 'Dignity Diaries' sharing the experiences of those they serve - though they have expressed that one area they have wrestled with when it comes to dignity is sufficiently holistic tools of measurement of people's experiences.

A spirit of allowing those they serve to set the agenda

Woven into all of these programs is a spirit of allowing those they serve to set the agenda. Meenakshi explained that "We tend to think, you know, some government is going to come in and repair their ecosystem or some humanitarian aid agencies are

going to rehabilitate them. But what about them becoming active stakeholders in their own rehabilitation and repair, point to dignity.” This, our informants explained, represents an important challenge to global systems of aid and trade.

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“So, that became a big good learning point for us to understand that when in the villages of India where people are very poor, in comparison to cities, people place so much value on their self-respect and dignity, how do we show up in such places for development work.”
- Meenakshi Gupta

Interviewees: Anshu Gupta & Meenakshi Gupta, Co-Founders.



Photo by [Adi Lica](#) on [Unsplash](#)



*Relentless focus on
accompaniment worldwide*

The whole ethos of PIH is about providing quality healthcare with a preferential option for the poor. They start from the premise that all lives have equal moral significance, and therefore that health and access to quality healthcare is an important part of allowing people to live life with dignity.

To do this, they start with long term commitments to accompaniment. In Liberia, they started by making a long term commitment to the Ministry of Health- a minimum 5 year MOU with conversations about a 25+ year vision of generational change. This gives time and space to do things in the right way, even if it is not the way funding opportunities are structured. PIH urges organizations to spend time understanding the needs of the places where they are conducting the research. Alicia Ely Yamin, Senior Advisor on Human Rights and Health Policy for PIH, told us "I think one of the great problems in global health particularly is that research agendas are set in the North, research funding is done in the North, and research is done by people who do not understand the needs of the places that they are conducting the research."

This philosophy is also reflected in their internal structures. They have a decentralized leadership council that reflects leadership from around the world. They have built teaching hospitals, to ensure a pipeline of medical professionals aligned with their culture. More work has been done recently on caring for staff too, with a focus on pay equity, combating burnout culture, and ensuring gender equality.

Time and space to do things in the right way

In the provision of care, they have built patient feedback mechanisms, and extensively supported networks of community health workers. Perhaps most distinctively, each healthcare setting has a dignification budget for art and gardens, giving everyone some beauty to look at from their bed. Cate Oswald told us "we emphasize that the patient is your boss. And lead with that as the premise of why you go to work each day, and how you even imagine what care delivery would look like in that lens."

Ultimately, though, our informants emphasized that dignity isn't just about words and is not isolated from social, political and economic need. As they put it, there is no respectful care if you don't have the right medicines in stock. Over time, they believe

that the provision of high quality care helps construct a web of mutual democratic obligations between citizens and the state.

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“We do not see ourselves as being just technical, it is really that we are in partnership...That is a different understanding of health systems as being places where citizenship is constructed, where people feel that they have an entitlement to services, and where providers feel that the way they are delivering services or revising health services delivery is underpinned by a sense of constructive obligation.”

- Alicia Ely Yamin

Interviewees: Cate Oswald, Chief Policy and Partnership Officer & Dr. Alicia Ely Yamin, Senior Advisor on Human Rights and Health Policy.



Image by [Brian Odwar](#) from [Pixabay](#)



Relational organizing for dignity in Senegal

Tostan takes as its vision 'Dignity for All'. Their Community Empowerment Program in Senegal has been running for over 30 years. They told us that for them, naming dignity as their vision has helped them be more holistic, inclusive and participative, communicating their hope that the full human potential of all those they work with will be fulfilled. It has helped communicate the distinction they prize between their work and that of more typical NGOs in Africa, who may contribute to the continuation of the power imbalances of the colonial era. Their use of the term evolved out of a longstanding discourse on human rights and responsibilities through their work in the 1990s; dignity has been a term that has successfully rallied everyone.

Our informants explained how dignity had been put into practice in their programs, starting by listening to the wisdom of communities and taking enough time to contribute to real change. They pointed out that their three-year program is always invitational and builds towards leadership by the communities in question. The first six months of work focus wholly on deep relationship building, collective visioning, and joint priority setting, supported by facilitators living full time in those communities. The facilitators form nonformal education classes and also recruit a community committee, with reserved seats to ensure majority representation for women and participation by youth. These programs are, they explained, always developed from practical experience with continual iteration, and never begin with a preconceived position of what people want. The attention to dignity has been reinforced lately also within the organization, under the banner of a wellbeing agenda, supported by Tostan's CEO, Elena Bonometti and a staff committee.

Respecting the existing "houses of knowledge" among the people they work with

Tostan's focus on dignity has not always been simple. They have had to attend to differing understandings of dignity, and ensure that they are fully respecting the existing "houses of knowledge" among the people they work with in their programs across West Africa. They have had to resist pressure from donors to dilute their program in order to bring it to scale. They continue to navigate a complicated tension between their respect for prevailing social norms and their commitment to empowering women. To help them navigate, Tostan takes care to stimulate deliberations - in the classes

and within and across communities - that serve to connect the principles of human rights and responsibilities to strongly held West African values that are inherited and typically reflected in religion. Tostan constantly learns from the feedback, often relayed via the community committees and the facilitators that help convene them, of how communities agree on women taking on new roles that reflect their greater agency and leadership and are consistent with the shared value of respect for all.

Measurement of outcomes connected to dignity can be hard, Mady Cissé explained. They have been able to make some progress by observing the changes in relationships within a community. Ongoing learning is needed. Yet they perceive that their dignity approach leads to positive feedback loops. Francesca Moneti explained, “as they introduce changes in the way they relate, they improve wellbeing in terms of greater peace, harmony and collaboration, and decreased violence. This creates the conditions for them to generate all kinds of more traditional results in terms of better use of health services, birth registration of children, environmental cleanups, all sorts of things that they do. And the more they do them, the more they gain in dignity and self respect, and pride, which is linked to dignity. And so it becomes a positive virtuous cycle.”

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“So that they really have the feeling that they decide by themselves. And it is very important for someone to be able to decide for himself and to be listened to.”
- Mady Cissé

Interviewees: Mady Cissé, Monitoring and Evaluation Specialist, Francesca Moneti, Senior Adviser, Strategy and Programs, Gannon Gillespie, Senior Advisor, & Dr. Heather Lanthorn, Program Director at SSRC.



Niaming Street: Investigation in Niaming ©IDinsight



Horizontal movements for dignity

All Together in Dignity - Fourth World is an international movement of solidarity among those in poverty, which believes that "Poverty is violence, and it threatens the inherent dignity of those who endure it." Their work across five continents lives that value. Diana Skelton explains that they are "creating conditions for people who are in the most difficult situations to be leading the way. To really be expressing what they actually think, is the right starting point because you learn the most about dignity from people who've had their dignity denied day after day, generation after generation."

As a movement of people, our informants explained that ATD operates a very horizontal type of governance. Program objectives are set by those living in poverty in convenings of members every five years. Communications materials are reviewed by those same people. All members receive only a low stipend, and live alongside those they hope to serve. The voices of those in poverty in one place are co-equal with those in another place - whether that is Mexico, Madagascar or the UK.

Taking note of the transformative power of respectful encounters

Work rarely focuses on direct distribution of aid. Instead, ATD brings together people in poverty, and helps them communicate their messages to governments and build new kinds of relationships with those in power. Their participatory research on 'the hidden dimensions of poverty' conveys the expert views of those in poverty on the diverse experiences and harms of poverty. In communicating this, they are careful about language, avoiding terms that demean. As Matt Davies puts it "That label of poverty means they are seen as something else and not afforded the same treatment as fellow citizens who do not live in poverty."

ATD frequently feels their work operates as a direct challenge to the current system of aid and governance in many of the places in which they work. They frequently have to resist the imposition of unsuitable and disrespectful donor requirements. Diana Skelton explains that "The biggest obstacle is just how inhumane the system is. We can very much try as an organization within our projects to instill his concept and philosophy of dignity and people really feel empowered by that but then they come up against the system which just removes all their dignity." ATD advocates for an

expanded vision of human potential, in which donors and governments view each person as a unique citizen with values and aspirations, not merely one number.

Their work under this value is reinforced, our informants suggested, each time they notice the transformative power of respectful - or disrespectful - interactions. Giving examples from Haiti, Madagascar, the UK and Mexico, they spoke movingly of how much difference it makes when people are treated in a way that respects their dignity, and how much pain is caused when that promise is broken.

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**“Getting people to think with each other about the differences, about what there is in common, leads us to new pathways. The same way scientists and doctors need to meet internationally, it is the exact same thing with poverty.”
- Diana Skelton**

Interviewees: Diana Skelton, Head of Mission, & Matt Davies, Regional Coordinator for Latin America.



ATD Fourth World's international board of directors at the Plaza of Human Rights and Liberties in Paris, France. © ATD Fourth World.

GiveDirectly

Learning & technology
enabling agency

GiveDirectly founds its culture of dignity on the simplicity of its program: unconditional cash transfers that respect the autonomy of recipients. Dr. Miriam Laker-Oketta told us “At GiveDirectly we recognize that people living in poverty are human beings with the same dignity as everyone else.” Research has shown that cash transfers can better respect the dignity of recipients than in-kind aid (Shapiro, 2019). Ariana Esma Keyman explained that the organization goes so far as to think of its mission as rendering itself almost invisible: “we want to minimize this role we play as a middle person with a view for transferring wealth and transferring all of the privileges that come with wealth including choice to the recipients that we serve.” The organization has often turned down funding because it came with too many conditions.

Recipients are given the choice

This culture has not always come easily. The organization has wrestled with balancing the efficiencies and scale granted by technology with the need to meet people in a humane and flexible way. Learning over time, GiveDirectly has added a number of internal structures to ensure they are delivering this money in the right way. A Director of Recipient Advocacy helps ensure their values are upheld and encourages inclusivity in the design of programs. An internal audit team runs regular surveys of recipient experiences, including whether people feel they have been treated in a way that respects their dignity. A process of deeper engagement with the communities receiving cash has helped address early challenges and misunderstandings among recipients worried about the obligations put upon them by this transfer. Recipients are given the choice of who in the household receives the cash transfers, and the organization has investigated allowing choice over the timing of transfers also. An exceptionally strong commitment to research helps GiveDirectly understand the impact of its work on people’s lives. Tweaks are made to the model in each place - Dr. Laker Oketta said “We strive to respect their dignity by listening to them and understanding the contexts in which we live. We know that no two people are the same and needs can be as varied as those we seek to help.”

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“You know, poverty is a highly dehumanizing context to be living in and strips individual of their dignity often and so I would say everything that we do is about trying to support the restoration of that dignity through wealth transfers and minimizing any imposition of preferences or anything else by us as an organization that is delivering the wealth.”
- Ariana Esma Keyman

Interviewees: Dr Miriam Laker-Oketta, Research Director, & Ariana Esma Keyman, Partnerships Director.



GiveDirectly field officer, Alphonse Fondo, enrolling a new recipient into ongoing large cash transfer program in Kilifi, Kenya. © GiveDirectly.

Conclusion

What does it take to keep the promise we make, when we say that a life matters? What changes to programs, processes, policies, cultures and messages allow the development sector to embrace the full humanity of those they seek to serve?

This report offers lessons to those organizations and their leaders who wish to instill a culture of dignity in their work. It shows that it can be done. We hope the six lessons we described above provide nourishment and guidance to those embarking on this journey.

Diana Skelton, one of our interviewees at ATD Fourth World, told us the following story of the transformational power of dignity in her work:



“When I was living in Madagascar there was a big event, The International Day for the Eradication of Poverty. And previously because that is an official UN day, there had been ways to mark the day at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. And ATD came and said that ‘how come people living in poverty are not part of that day?’

So with a lot of anxiety, they finally allowed us to do that and we had an event with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that involved the Prime Minister and involved about 200 people who were living in a slum at the time. I was really struck by one of the staff people from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs who said, he had never imagined that people who were barefooted, who did not own shoes would be at his Ministry and in his mind he had been sure that if that ever did happen, it would be because of an armed insurrection, a revolution. And for him, it was just such a huge surprise that people who are living in a slum who didn’t have shoes were in his ministry and interacting in this positive way and talking about what is it we can do to reduce poverty, end poverty, and have dignity in human rights, be respected.

It changed something for him completely. To think that I can have a conversation with this person that I was afraid of before.” - Diana Skelton, National Coordination Team ATD Fourth World.

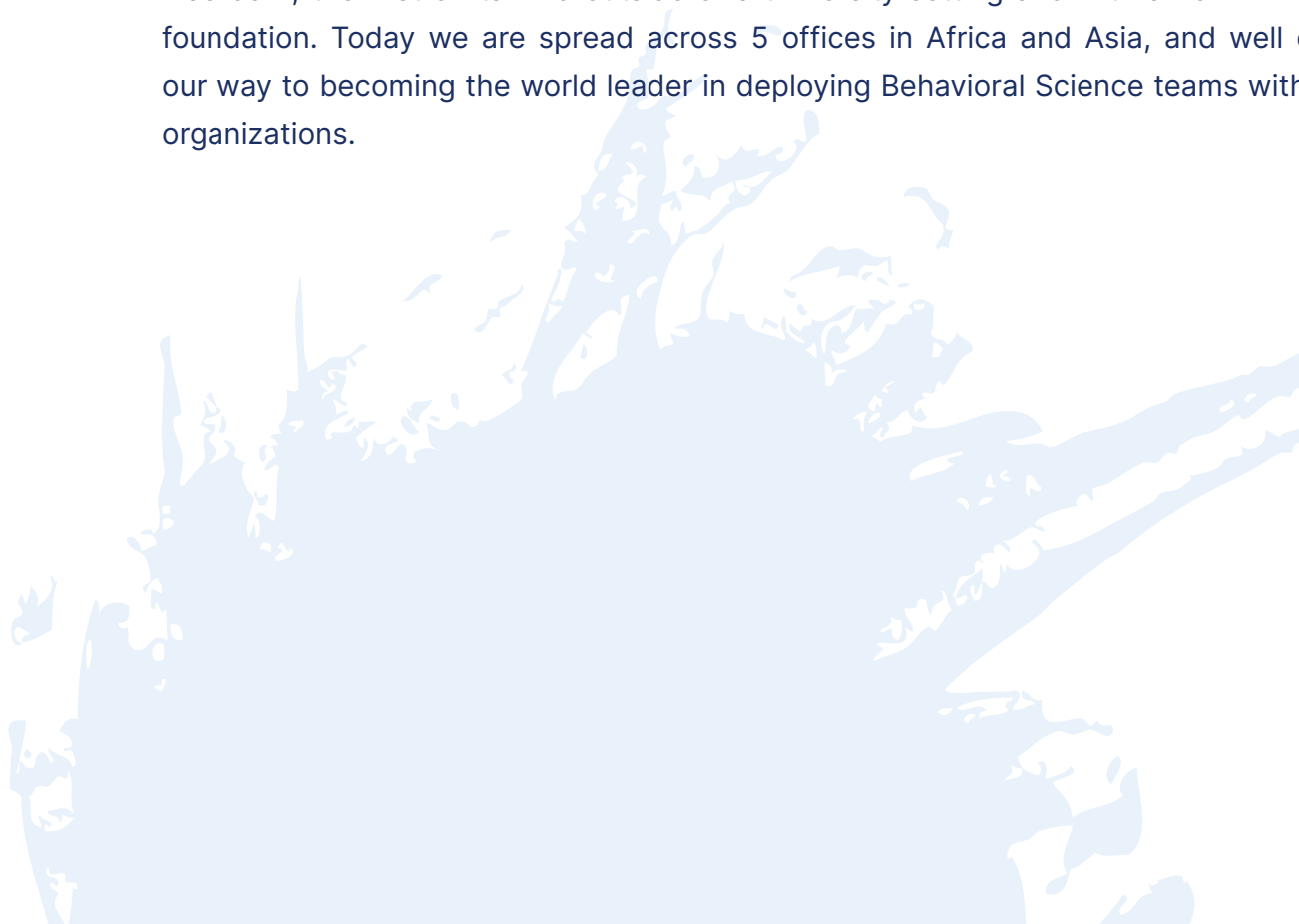
Authors

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Read more about Joel's work [here](#). Read more about Tom's work [here](#).

IDinsight uses rigorous evidence to help leaders improve lives. We tailor a wide range of data and evidence tools, including randomized evaluations and monitoring, to help decision-makers design effective programs and rigorously test what works to support communities. IDinsight works with governments, multilaterals, foundations, and innovative non-profit organizations in Asia and Africa in a range of sectors.

Busara is a research and advisory firm dedicated to advancing and applying Behavioral Science in the pursuit of poverty alleviation. Our journey began in 2011 when we realized the need for a local decision lab to facilitate our research studies. In creating the appropriate infrastructure, the Busara Center for Behavioral Economics was born, the first of its kind outside of a university setting and with a non-WEIRD foundation. Today we are spread across 5 offices in Africa and Asia, and well on our way to becoming the world leader in deploying Behavioral Science teams within organizations.





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