

Prisoner Recidivism: A Question for Social Marketing

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Our society is today grappling with a myriad of social, political and economic problems in a time of greatly reduced and very costly resources. All of these problems are connected, in some way, with each other. It is the very nature of societies and this interconnectedness must be understood and appreciated, because, if left unheeded, the consequences can be quite dramatic. With the advent of social marketing, society now has proven methods of effectively attacking these problems to create many types of desired social changes. Prisoner recidivism is just such a problem. It has intense social, political and economic ties to our communities. Its struggle is in determining how best to establish a process by which society can effectively deal with people who break our laws and yet still be held accountable. Like most social problems, it is complex and has advocates, on many sides of the issues, advancing solutions that are being recognized, at best, as incomplete. Can social marketing be the impetus that connects all these disparate solutions into one cohesive whole? Can it influence people enough to change behavior? This paper examines the potential role that social marketing can have in dealing with these questions.

INTRODUCTION

Social marketing, as a discipline, was born in the 1970s. It recognized that marketing principles could be used to influence consumer thinking about public issues in a similar way as how they are used to sell products. Kotler and Andreasen define social marketing as

“Differing from other areas of marketing only with respect to the objectives of the marketer and his or her organization. Social marketing seeks to influence social behaviors not to benefit the marketer, but to benefit the target audience and the general society.”

Other definitions include, *“Social Marketing is the planning and implementation of programs designed to bring about social change using concepts from commercial marketing”*. (www.social-marketing.org)

“Social marketing is the application of commercial marketing technologies to the analysis, planning, execution and evaluation of programs designed to influence the voluntary behavior of target audiences in order to improve their personal welfare and that of their society”. (Alan Andreasen, Georgetown University)

“Social marketing is the use of marketing principles and techniques to influence a target audience to voluntarily accept, reject, modify or abandon a behavior for the benefit of individuals, groups or society as a whole”. (Philip Kotler, Ned Roberto, Nancy Lee, 2002)

Over the past years, we have witnessed the social marketing process address, with considerable success, issues like drugs, smoking, contraception (safe sex), drunk driving and on many local levels, a number of green and conservation issues. Its successes are due to the sophisticated approach marketer use rather than relying on simplistic methods like public service announcements. Research into the public's

perception of an issue and a complete evaluation of every facet of the problem allow marketers to develop effective communication campaigns that help people understand many of the complexities involved within an issue and allow them opportunities to alter their thinking and behavior.

RECIDIVISM

The following are excerpts from an article in Mother Jones magazine by Sasha Abramsky.

Jason, 19 has just been released from Riker's Island, New York City's jail complex, where he spent one year for dealing drugs.

"Jail is whacked, man, whacked," says Jason. "I picked up some violent shit in there. You're with people locked up for murder, gun charges. Eventually that shit's going to wear on you." Jason witnessed another inmate who was sodomized with a stick by a group of kids. He himself was slashed twice and stabbed in the back with sharpened paper clips. Never having been convicted of a violent crime, Jason retaliated by stabbing a rival gang member. He was sent to solitary confinement, a space the size of a small bathroom, for three months. "You're in there by yourself," he says, "End up playing with roaches and shit. You end up going crazy." Then one day, you're sent right back to your old neighborhood".

By subjecting petty criminals to a world of hardened violence, America's experiment with mass-scale incarceration may ultimately make its streets not safer, but more dangerous.

"What I'm seeing is people coming out of prison with anywhere from moderate to severe symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder," says Bonnie Kerness, associate director of the American Friends Service Committee's Criminal Justice Program in Newark, New Jersey. "People are coming out with hair-trigger tempers."

Violent conditions in prisons continue to increase. Raced-based gangs dominate prison life and often collide brutally with each other. Staff assaults, inmate assaults on staff and male-on-male rape are commonplace today.

Studies over the past three decades confirm that prison time actually seems to make inmates more likely to commit crimes. Studies from the University of North Carolina and Carnegie-Mellon University generally agree that prison serves as a "graduate school" for crime.

Ex-cons return to society with tremendous amounts of frustration and anger. They are not prepared to face the challenges of re-entry. It is not difficult to understand why these people fail. They basically exist in a violent environment for the duration of their sentence, receive practically no rehabilitative services, and then are released.

Prisons are overcrowded; inmates stay, on average, in prison longer each year, and are more likely to commit crimes when released. These failures will be felt by everyone.

DEFINITION AND PROBLEM

Recidivism is defined as the number of ex-cons who return to prison within three years of their release. However, most arrests occur within the first six months of release.

Measuring recidivism is difficult because different metrics and methodologies are used by different organizations to establish their measurements and advance their causes. But, by many estimates, the number of ex-cons who return to prison is about 65%. Each year, 650,000 inmates are released from prison in the United States. That means that in a worse case scenario, 422,500 inmates will return to prison within that time period. This represents the fastest category of prison growth of all demographic groups. Why?

Most ex-cons, when released from prison, have serious medical and social problems. Better than 75% have a history of drug or alcohol abuse. Yet less than a third get any treatment while in prison. Additionally, some 7 million inmates are released from county and local jails. Although their plight is somewhat different, they too are at a great disadvantage when seeking housing and employment. They, too often, end up returning to a life of crime and drugs that adds to the figures on recidivism.

Few inmates have skills or literacy capabilities sufficient to secure employment. About a third was unemployed when arrested and about 60% have a GED or high school education. About 11% of this population has learning disabilities and three per cent are retarded. (Petersilia, 2000)

Inmates have always been released from prison and struggled to succeed. But the current situation is different. The number of returning offenders dwarfs anything known before; the needs of released inmates are greater and corrections have retained few rehabilitation programs. A number of unfortunate collateral consequences are likely, including child abuse, family violence, the spread of infectious disease, homelessness and community disorganization. The implications for public safety and risk management are major factors for reentry. For many people in some communities, incarceration is becoming almost a normal experience. The phenomenon is effecting the socialization of young people and the future trajectory of crimes and crime victimization. (Perersilia)

Research indicates that offender reentry has become synonymous with offender risk in the minds of the media, public officials and private citizens.....it is evident that individual justice agencies will continue to muddle through on this issue as long as they continue to think organizationally (small) rather than systematically (big). (From Prisons Safety to Public Safety, US Department of Justice)

Clearly, this is a question of perspective. It presents an opportunity to influence public and private thinking about the issues and make value judgments about how best to confront it. That is how do we prepare incarcerated and recently released offenders to be productive and contributing members of society and how do we prepare communities to support, sustain, and when necessary, sanction offenders returning under a wide range of release conditions. (From Prison Safety to Public Safety, US Department of Justice)

In 2004, in the state of the union address, President Bush announced his Prisoner Reentry Initiative (PRI) To date, over \$100 million has been awarded to urban centers and faith-based and community organizations through the Departments of Labor (DOL) and Justice (DOJ) to deliver social services to ex-prisoners. Other federal government initiatives include the Reentry Partnership Initiative (RPI), the Transition from Prison to Community Initiative (TPCI) and the Ready4Work Initiative. The problem with these and other similar programs is that no objective measures exist to determine if and to what extent they work. Until these programs involve shared decision-making by police, institutional corrections, community corrections, and public/private service providers, results will continue to be incomplete, biased and unhelpful in allowing society to reach a consensus about what really works and why it is successful. (For detail on these and other programs see www.usdoj.gov)

SOCIAL MARKETING

As previously noted, social marketing has been instrumental in influencing public sentiment and behavior regarding many issues. The question is now about recidivism. Is this an issue that interested organizations can address by applying marketing principles in a structured way to achieve a higher purpose?

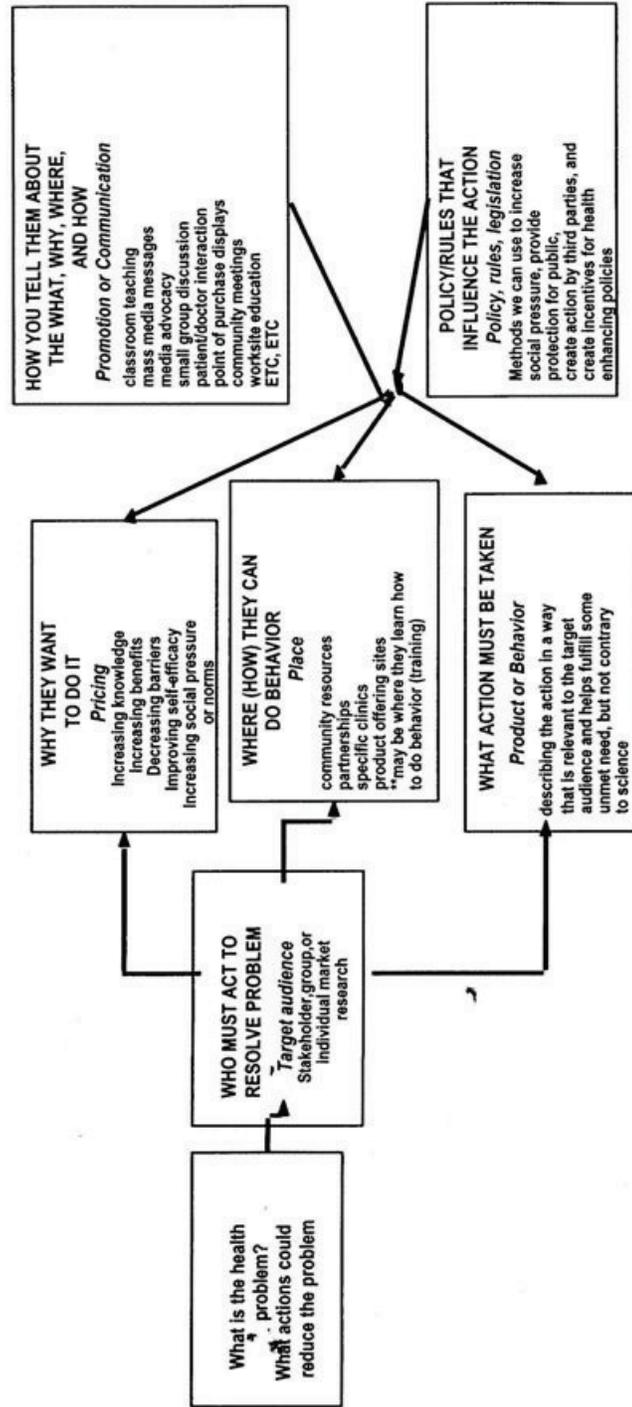
This paper will attempt to make that case using Susan D. Kirby's Social Marketing: A Model for Intervention that Facilitates Change. (See Exhibit A)

The first stage of the model asks for the identification of the health issues and for specific actions that could reduce the problem.

Clearly this is a health problem. As Petersilia noted earlier, the major health issues of *child abuse, family violence, the spread of infectious disease, homelessness and community disorganization* are at stake. These are issues that affect all of society and have grave consequences when not adequately addressed.

Identifying specific actions to address these problems presents quite a challenge in itself. The first and most obvious action is to increase the amount and type of resources needed to effectuate the problems. But as public and private officials are learning, resources, alone cannot be effective. In the past several years alone, the federal government has spent over \$100 million in new initiatives. State and local governments have also allocated millions of dollars in the same way. Many organizations are bringing in

Social Marketing: A Model for Interventions that Facilitate Change



Social Marketing as a Model for Interventions that Facilitate Change
Susan D. Kirby, 1995

Turning Point

additional expertise and adding new programs. The results are mixed at best and disappointing at worst. One reason and perhaps the key point in this discussion is the way in which the problems are being expressed. Recidivism and the social ills that are created because of crime are but symptoms of other, more basic social problems. If we identify and address those problems, these symptoms will dissipate.

In order to determine specific action to be taken as part of a social marketing strategy, a better understanding of the components of the problem is necessary. There is a plethora of research data available in this regard to accomplish this task. For example, in many of the RPI sites around the country, focus group results consistently reveal four common themes among offender's perceptions; (1) the offender's role in society (e.g., stigma); (2) the offenders acknowledgement of the harm they have done to family and community; (3) the offenders doubts about becoming a self-sufficient, self-supporting and contributing member of society; and (4) the offenders uncertainties about acknowledging the need for help and utilizing support and community services to address physical, social and psychological needs central to successful reintegration (Taxman).

Action: *because offenders readily articulate these issues, it is incumbent upon all service agencies to match their perceptions and beliefs about what is best for offenders with the knowledge, experience, beliefs and feelings of the offender.*

Many programs around the country have failed because this task was not completed. Research must be believed and heeded in order for it to have any chance of success. One problem is that practitioners and researchers do not agree on many points concerning methodology and results. Each side believes they and they alone have the answers and are somewhat unwilling to yield. The results are usually met with failure. What's worse, valuable time and resources are wasted. A waste our society can ill afford.

Another example is public perception. Public sentiment and political rhetoric have forced the reduction of many prison programs. A number of new "no frills" statutes have been passed, eliminating smoking, weightlifting equipment, hot meals, personal clothing, telephone calls, family days and so forth. Proponents argue that reducing such privileges is deserved because incarceration should be punitive.

Treatment and work programs have also been affected by the same thought process. Why should law-abiding citizens pay for free services for inmates?

More punitive attitudes combined with diminished rehabilitation programs means that more inmates spend more "idle" time in prison. This means that higher risk inmates are going into prison, with fewer programs and more idle time while in prison and a greater number are getting out of prison without many benefits and substantial amounts of pent up rage.

Action: *the public must be made aware of the impact this sentiment has on public policy and to the communities of the returning inmates.*

Punishment must be redefined not to include the elimination of basic programs that will provide inmates with the opportunity to rehabilitate themselves. This issue is probably the single most important linchpin in the entire correctional system. Prison time, in and of itself, is an opportunity to use time in a constructive manner. The term correction implies that notion. It is also an opportunity to use time in a destructive manner. Inmates will recidivate because they are ill prepared to meet the challenges of reentry. In a sense reentry equates with prisoner recidivism to drive up the crime rate. To the degree that public sentiment changes in this direction, public policy can focus on implementing what works and be confident of the support of their constituents.

Mandatory sentencing laws have removed much of the flexibility of corrections officials in dealing with inmates. Once a prisoner completes their sentence, they are released without supervision. There is no oversight for that ex-con to monitor and support his efforts to reintegrate into his community. Prisoners who do not "max out" are released to parole supervision. Many parole departments have developed a culture of surveillance over services. Statistics show that about 10% of parolees fail to report to their parole officers. In some states that figure is as high as 22%. Taken together, these numbers represent about 200,000 inmates coming out of prison each year, unsupervised.

Action: *federal and state authorities must continue to review and change mandatory sentencing laws. More discretion is needed in the hands of judges who sentence offenders for specific crimes.*

To bundle crimes beneath one banner severely hinders the judge's ability to demand accountability of all participants in the correctional system.

Action: Parole departments need to be integrated into larger social services systems in order to add a service component to their surveillance culture.

This is particularly true for inner-city communities, the place where the majority of inmates return and where there are scarce resources available for these types of programs. Until and unless this happens, these actions will only continue to add to the problem, not become part of a solution.

The next stage in the model asks about the target audience; *who must act to solve the problem*. The answer is ALL the people involved in the corrections system: the governments, the private sector and the independent researchers. The one caveat is that each party must take into consideration the budgetary constraints, legal conventions and actual implementation problems that exist, but yet not use these as excuses or reasons not to act or allow them to inhibit tenable solutions. The status quo will not work. Each party must become part of an integrated effort of change agents determined to succeed.

The third stage addresses the issues of pricing; posing the question, *why do they want to do it*. In marketing, pricing is all about value. Price is really nothing more than a reflection of the perceived market value of what is being offered. The salient issues in this case are increased knowledge and benefits, improving efficiency and societal norms.

Costs are also a function of pricing. It requires investments into projects in order to create the expectation of returns (ROI) In this case there are also social costs. The intangible effects that improper action or inaction has on the welfare of all communities impacted by recidivism.

According to a report released by the Public Safety Performance Project of the Pew Charitable Trusts, *Public Safety, Public Spending: Forecasting America's Prison Population 2007-2011*, projects that by 2011, America will have an additional 200,000 people in prisons at a cost of an additional \$27.5 billion dollars.

In other words, one out of every 178 U. S. residents will live in prison. The report declares that with tight budgets, states are questioning whether these types of investments are the most prudent way for taxpayers to get a strong return on their investment in corrections, i.e., safer communities, efficient use of public dollars, ex-cons who become productive, law-abiding citizens in their respective communities.

The highest cost per prisoner per year in the country is in Rhode Island; \$44,860. The lowest is in Louisiana; \$13,009. The average throughout the U.S. is approximately \$22,000.

How best to proceed. There is ample evidence from completed research to suggest that specific and targeted programs can and do work well.

According to a study the Florida's Department of Correction of 18,414 inmates released from prison in FY 1996-97, and tracking their progress for a period of 36 months (the 3 year recidivism period), the following results were noted:

- Inmates who completed programs are more successful after release than those who do not.
- Inmates who earned a GED were 8.7% less likely to recidivate than those who did not.
- Over 70% of GED completers were successful after release.
- Inmates who earned a vocational certificate were 14.6% less likely to recidivate than those who did not.
- Nearly three-quarters of those prisoners in vocational programs were successful after release.
- Inmates who completed substances abuse programs were 6.2% less likely to recidivate than those who did not.
- Over two-thirds of substance abuse programs were completed after release.
- All groups, who normally have a high recidivism rate (young Black and Hispanic males), were impacted at about the same rate as other groups.

Ed Schwartz, President of the Institute for the Study of Civic Values, in his testimony to the City Council Public Safety Hearings on Prisoner Reentry, in Philadelphia, on February 15th, 2005, recounts the following numbers:

Of the city's \$2.2 billion dollar budget, \$1.1 billion goes to the Criminal Justice System, the rest to everything else.

The daily prison census has jumped 70% over the past 10 years, from 4800 to 8100.

Nearly 40% of the people in the Philadelphia Prison are there for drug related offenses.

58% of sentenced inmates return to PPS (probation/parole violation) custody within two years with a new sentence.

According to the prison commissioner, Leon King, 21,000, of the 35,000 prisoners will not be able to receive adequate reentry discharge services this year.

Schwartz continued; consider the following:

- In 1987, there were 5,200 people in our homeless shelters at a cost of \$32 million dollars.
- Today there are only 2,500 and the budget is \$18 million dollars.
- In 1997, there were 67,000 households on welfare.
- Today, there are 26,000 and instead of spending \$600 million dollars to keep these families alive, the city receives \$600 million dollars from the State of Pennsylvania for its after-school program.

In each instance people said it couldn't be done. They were wrong. We have the resources, do we have the will to do it.

There are similar happenings around the country. In Illinois, The Sheridan and Operation Spotlight initiative is in place and seeing results. In Kansas, The Prisoner RE-entry and Justice Reinvestment Initiative with its focus on neighborhoods, demand accountability, inspire hope is doing well. In California, The Division of Reentry and Recidivism Reduction (DORR) has developed a master plan for reentry that is underway. In Michigan, The Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative strives to facilitate reintegration of parolees into society.

Future generations will bear the burden created by today's recidivism rates. In 2006, The Department of Health and Social Services reported that 2 million children nationwide have an incarcerated parent. (www.govtrack.us/congress/record/xpd?id=110-s20070412-20)

There are a number of other similar studies around the country that support the results of the several examples shown above. There is also a movement in a number of states to build new prisons. Most state prisons are operating at full capacity and a number of them as much as 14% above capacity. Federal prisons are 34% above capacity. (www.govtrack.us/congress/record/exp?id=110-s20070412-20)

The question of value remains an open one. How can society get the most value for their tax dollars; build more prisons or invest in rehabilitation programs? Social marketing initiatives can certainly influence this debate.

The next stage in sequence is probably the most critical. It deals with the product element or, in this case, the behavior. It asks: *What Action Must Be Taken?* What can we convey to our market to influence their thinking?

Jeremy Travis, in his research brief, *But They All Come Back: Rethinking Prisoner Re-Entry* introduces the idea of *restorative justice*, the most innovative of all new reentry initiatives. He explains that "implicit in restorative justice initiatives is the notion that an important purpose of criminal sanction is reintegrating the offender into the community following his acceptance of personal responsibility for the harm done to victims and community and his 'payment' of appropriate penance.... The 'shaming' approach, so prevalent in today penal systems, without a re-integrative purpose, is at best wasted effort and at worst counter-productive". (Travis 2000)

He offers a new vision of what the entire corrections process could be. In his "ideal" model, the sentencing judge would create a reentry court. At the time of sentencing, the judge would say, "John Smith, you are being sentenced to X years and Y months which will be served in the community under my supervision. Our goal is to admit you back into our community after you pay your debt for your offensive and demonstrate your ability to live by our rules. Starting today, we will develop, with your involvement, a plan to achieve that goal. The plan will require hard work of you, beginning in prison and continuing- and getting harder- after you return to the community. It will also require that your family, friends, neighbors and any other people interested in your welfare commit to the goal of your successful

return. I will oversee your entire sentence to make sure the goal is achieved, including monitoring your participation in prison programs that prepare you for release. Many other criminal justice agencies-police, corrections, parole, probation, drug-treatment and others- will be part of a team committed to achieving the goal. If you do not keep up your end of the bargain, I will further restrict your liberty, although only in amounts proportionate to your failure. If you commit a crime after your release, all bets are off. If you do keep up your end of the bargain, it is within my power to accelerate the completion of your sentence, to return privileges that might be lost (such as your right to hold certain types of jobs or your right to vote) and welcome you back into the community". (Travis 2000)

The benefits here are most obvious. But logistical problems appear almost overwhelming. That is why setting realistic goals is paramount to success. The challenge would be to create interagency networks to allow the model to function effectively.

From a social marketing standpoint, this model represents the best action that can be taken to address the problems of recidivism. It offers all the stakeholders in the corrections system an ideal for which to strive. It also defines, in Kirby's model, the place element of where these behaviors would occur.

It is important to caution against setting unrealistic goals. It must be understood that these initiatives are part of a long-term strategy to move the system in a particular direction. Progress will be slow and uneven. There are metrics available to help measure and monitor progress. This would seem to be the primary role of the research organizations. Strong leadership, patience and a steady pace of activities will be required if the type of change that is being sought is to be achieved.

The last stage of the model addresses the promotion and communication function. How best to get out the message; what should be the messages and why should the messages be believed?

Communication objectives will ultimately determine how successful any promotional campaign can be. The following questions must be addressed:

- To whom are we trying to communicate?
- What is it that we want to communicate?
- How best to say it and which vehicles will carry the messages most effectively.

There are any numbers of equally effective answers to these questions. Most organizations, if they do not have in-house creative resources, have access to public relations firms and advertising agencies. Their expertise allows them to address these challenges once the communication objectives have been established.

It would appear that this issue is important enough to warrant a national, comprehensive approach to sufficiently attack the problems. The US Department of Justice and other involved federal agencies must take the lead in this matter.

The communication objectives should make every effort to educate the public about each facet of the problem and how it does now and will continue to affect the quality of life for everyone. The messages should not be "candy coated", but rather show the reality of what is happening and what can happen. The messages should be balanced. There are advocates for more prisons and advocates for more rehabilitation services. They represent many different perspectives. To the extent possible, each one should get equal time and coverage. This will allow the public to accept the credibility of the information and make informed judgments. Over time, perspectives will change and so will behavior.

There are many not-for-profit organizations that can lead the way. For example, The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation has been a leader in matters like this and has spearheaded many initiatives for a variety of social issues. There are hundreds of similar foundations and charities whose mission it is to address the social questions of the day. The Ad Council has also been instrumental in air many commercial in traditional media in service of social causes. Today, with the prevalence of electronic media, there are a number of outlets appropriate for addressing this issue: social networks like Myspace.com and Spacebook.com; YouTube.com and several media sites like, popularmedia.com, collactive.com, social-media-optimization.com, blog.splashcastmedia.com.

The question for the leadership of involved and interested parties to this industry is this: does this issue meet their standard as a cause to be addressed? I think the answer should be yes.

CONCLUSION

Clearly the magnitude of the issues involved in understanding and contending with prisoner recidivism are enormous. They are comprehensive in nature and require a long-range, concerted effort by all constituents involved in the corrections process to effectuate the kind of change necessary for a better society. It took many years of sustained efforts by many stakeholders to change the thinking and habits of smokers. Like smoking, this is a health issue. The physical and mental well-being of many communities is at stake. Their quality of life depend on society's ability to make sound judgments based on solid research and proven results.

Social marketing should not have any hidden agendas, and not advocate for one position over another. As with smoking, it should depict a series of realities that are a reflection of the results of particular behaviors. Elements of society can then choose whether to continue or change that behavior. The role of marketing is to try and influence the thinking that leads to behavior.

This problem really does exemplify the "*we are all in this together*" syndrome. The degree of interdependence required among all participants to assure long-term success is quite staggering. It demands new levels of maturity and sacrifice through the elimination of territorialism and righteousness. If we fail, we risk the de facto classification of these groups of people as *untouchables* and the dismissing of them in our own unique kind of *caste* system. If this happens then we, as human beings, will all be diminished by it.

Society has choices. Through well-developed social marketing campaigns, society can have the ability to make sound ones.

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