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## Professor touts keys to international community development success

By Lance Wallace | © MARCH 11, 2016 • ATLANTA, GA



Georgia Tech political scientist and global development champion Kirk Bowman offers an alternative approach to international development projects and philanthropy.

On a campus known for new technologies and scientific breakthroughs, one professor applies the principles of innovation to the process of community development.

With a strategy he calls “identify, invest and inspire,” Georgia Tech professor Kirk Bowman seeks successful non-profit organizations fighting poverty around the world to learn from them, give to them and tell their story to as many people as possible.

Bowman and the students who take his study abroad courses in Georgia Tech’s Sam Nunn School of International Affairs in the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts have found out what it takes to make a difference in the global fight against poverty.

“I spent a decade working on local development projects in Fiji with an incredible group of scientists and local partners,” said Bowman, associate chair of the Nunn School and the Jon Wilcox Term Professor of Soccer and Global Politics. “We had the world’s greatest idea for transformative projects along with excellent funding, great local partners, coverage in important magazines, and we sold the product to the incredible Georgia Aquarium. We were going to start some serious ripples! Our great idea, our great project, our giant failure.”

In a TEDx Peachtree presentation at Georgia Tech, available on the [TEDx YouTube channel](#), Bowman outlined the steps to sustainable community development internationally from what he has learned in the impoverished neighborhoods called favelas in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

First, instead of investing time and money in Western start-ups in developing countries, provide expansion capital to existing, locally originated organizations with a track record of success. Bowman described this approach as the “community bank model.”

“A banker friend convinced me that there is a better way, the community bank model, which can have success rates as high as 99 percent,” Bowman said. “How do community banks increase the success rate from 25 percent to 99 percent? Rather than trying to start up new ripples, we should be looking for existing ripples and successful local leaders and help amplify those. This shift would dramatically increase the efficiency of the billions of dollars donated to international charities each year.”

Second, instead of investing in the next great idea, invest in long-term relationships with organizations that are already successful. So far, Bowman has established partnerships with six such organizations in Rio de Janeiro: Crescer e Viver, Miratus, Jongo da Serrinha, Redes de Maré, Cinema Nosso and Nós do Morro.

The third principle in Bowman's formula for success is focusing on a niche. In his case, it's performance-oriented organizations for youth. Each of the six partner organizations he is involved with focuses on developing youth in a unique way. Crescer e Viver uses the circus arts and performance; Miratus uses badminton; Cinema Nosso uses audio visual production; Jongo da Serrinha uses dance; Redes de Maré is multifaceted and includes education, dance, photography, and community pride; and Nós do Morro draws on acting and theater.

"We believe that high-level performance provides a ladder of inspiration, teamwork, identity, dreams and career opportunities," Bowman said. "These include a range of activities such as sports, theater, circus, visual arts, dance and more."

The fourth step is to play the role of the sidekick, not the superhero. Traditionally, international development projects are brought to impoverished communities, and the Western aid agency is the "superhero."

In Bowman's model, the aid agency brings the capital but is the "sidekick" to the local superheroes who have been working in their communities and have established trust.

"Local ideas and innovation are fragile flames in communities in former colonies," Bowman said. "If an American shows up with their big idea and their swagger and American exceptionalism, we suck up all the oxygen and crowd out local ideas and local leaders. We need to oxygenate local ideas and nourish their flames of innovation."

For the badminton academy, Miratus, the local innovation was incorporating footwork from Samba dancing into badminton. After importing badminton experts and failing to achieve success in competitions, those with the dream of building a badminton center hit on the idea of using Samba to teach the children to have lightning quick footwork. And it worked.

"The most recent national badminton tournament took place in Caxias do Sul in September," Bowman said. "Twenty-eight Miratus athletes traveled nearly 40 hours by bus and slept on the floor in a rented two-room house with only one shower. They were at a competitive disadvantage against the other 205 athletes, but had the advantage of the quickest feet. The kids from Miratus—trained through samba dancing—dominated with 12 gold medals, nine silver, and nine bronze."

Young people from Miratus now travel Brazil and the globe playing badminton, even winning medals in the Pan American games, and lifting the self-esteem of individuals and an entire community. One of their members is even currently qualified for the Brazilian Olympic team competing in Rio in 2016.

In the final step, Bowman inspires the partner organizations, their communities and the world through one-hour documentaries by award-winning filmmakers. Katia Lund, the co-director of "City of God," is directing the six films based in Rio de Janeiro.

Bowman isn't the only one learning from the development projects in the favelas of Rio. When Bowman teaches his study abroad course on community development, Georgia Tech students have the opportunity to travel to Rio and see the successful programs for themselves.

"I got involved with Rise Up & Care in August after my summer abroad in South America," said Hannah Todd, a business major from Peachtree City, Ga. "Dr. Bowman was the director of the trip, so I got to hear a lot about this project from him. What really made me want to get involved was my time in Brazil. At the end of my few weeks studying in Rio de Janeiro, all I could think was 'Wow. Now this is something I need to be a part of.'"

Todd went on to intern for Rise Up & Care and continues to advocate for its mission. Another Georgia Tech student, Hannah Musall of Augusta, Ga., followed a similar path that included an internship with Rise Up & Care.

"Rise Up & Care is a very personal experience for me," said Musall, who is majoring in international affairs and modern languages. "I have visited with two of the partner organizations, Miratus and Crescer e Viver, and have felt the inspiration and courage that they offer to their communities. To be able to help share this with the world has been a very fulfilling experience, and I am excited to see where the future takes us."

By no means does Bowman want to discourage international aid or investing in development. He believes in it so strongly that he has put his time and money where his mouth is, founding his own non-profit, Rise Up & Care. He and longtime friend and colleague, Jon Wilcox, a California banker, have caught the vision for successful community development, and putting their innovation into practice.

"Be generous and charitable but strategic. If we invert and twist the model, contributions to international projects can be—just like samba-badminton—transformative, efficient and lightning quick."

Learn more about Bowman's work at [www.riseup.care](http://www.riseup.care).