

Vermont Council on World Affairs Talk

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Thanks to gents who spoke to the subject. Theme of my life...gents who play by the rules so then I don't have to.

I can't really claim to be an 802 Ambassador, much as I'm honored by the title. At best a backwards Ambassador... but 208 puts me in Boise and that doesn't really work either.

What I mean by backwards is that rather than bringing VT to the world, I brought lessons from some of the most remote villages on the planet in my valise when I moved to Vermont.

It started after grad school. While the rest of my cohort were learning the rules of development at the World Bank, UNICEF, CARE, and ARD: things like how to do expense reports, how to calculate overhead, the intricacies of cost-benefit analysis, I headed out to remote villages in Mauritania, Madagascar, The Gambia and tried to figure out how communities could work together to (first) analyze their own situation, (second) devise ways to improve it, and (third) come up with a strategy to actually implement that plan.

This became my toolkit during a 20+ year career as a community development agent in Africa. Because I had a husband with a salaried job and health insurance, I was spared having to work with the big projects devised in Washington and Paris that told villagers what they needed and how to do it. Instead, I had the liberty to go around like an oversized cockroach always waving my antennae around. Always looking for good ideas and people with leadership and daring and spunk. I was the ambassador not for a place or a particular solution but rather for an idea.

The idea, so very simple in theory, but so infinitely complex in practice that people working together, wherever and whoever they are, can make good things happen. Trains, toilets, goat farms...it's really all the same. People need to decide that they want to do something, join forces, vanquish the naysayers, and get to work.

I am an ambassador from a rickety train line in Madagascar, destroyed by cyclones in 2000. After the cyclone we got people from 19 villages along the line to meeting somewhere in the middle. For the first half of the workshop, the train officials and the villagers yelled at each other that it was all the other side's fault. Then we decided to quit arguing about whose fault it was and start figuring out how to fix a train line. Starting with \$2,000 to pay villagers a dollar a day to dig 250,000 cubic meters of dirt off the line by hand, we went on to plant 3 million deep rooted vetiver plants to hold the soil in place against future storm events. The train workers built drainage ditches beneath the hillsides where the villagers were planting their vetiver.

Eventually we had to get big money involved to replace tunnels and bridges, but it started with people deciding that they were not going to stand for the status quo and were going to invest their hope and energy in making things better. Miraculously, it was only a couple of years before the train was

shipping thousands of tons of bananas and avocados out of the region, the economy was bouncing back, and school teachers and health workers were returning to live in these remote communities because they knew that they could get away for their holidays and make it back for work afterwards.

I am an ambassador from a poverty stricken urban neighborhood at the top of a hill in Fianarantsoa. The ornate mud walled houses used to cave in during winter rains. People had no latrines and used flying toilets (otherwise known as pooping in a plastic bag and throwing it into the closest drainage ditch). The steep walkways were so decayed that elders broke their legs going to the market. We sat down in that community and started planning. People wanted roofs. They wanted toilets. Five years later nearly every household in that community had access to a composting latrine, the walkways and stairs had been rebuilt, we had a micro-loan fund so that families could repair their tile roofs. An entrepreneurial woman opened a café that attracted curious tourists; where stinking piles of trash had previously filled every corner, now there were flowers and a palpable sense of pride.

So, when I moved to Vermont, I brought a powerful belief that people working together can...well...they can work miracles. I didn't get the memo that said you can only get things done if you have a six story NGO with Presidents and senior vice presidents and junior vice presidents and project officers and administrative assistants. I also missed the message saying that you have to ask permission from six different agencies and read shelves of code books before you launch your project. I thought that it was about good ideas and good-willed hard-working people taking those ideas and wrestling them into results that make a difference.

Arriving here, my antennae honed in on a lot of people who had landed on these shores as refugees. Each has an individual history as a victim of violence or persecution but they nearly all share a farming past. We also found a population of nearly 6000 people who longed for the familiar taste of goat meat and were buying 150 tons a year – frozen and imported from Australia and New Zealand. It became obvious that we needed a farm. A goat raising farm. Why not a goat raising farm run by refugees? And so began Pine Island Community Farm, in the Colchester Intervale where now, 4 years later, we have a Bhutanese farmer raising 300 goats a year, a Rwandan who raises nearly 3,000 chickens, and 68 families from a half dozen countries who are raising familiar vegetables on a 7 acre community garden plot. Last year, those New Americans produced about ¼ million dollars of food...right there on the edge of Winooski.

On our road to success, we ran into speedbumps to be sure ... bureaucracies, codes, illogical regulations. But, in Vermont as in Madagascar and Mauritania, when good people get together around good ideas...and – most importantly – when they don't listen to the doubters they can make things happen. While we needed money to implement the project and have been fortunate to have had some generous donors, we know that our fundamental strength going forward are the people, the relationships, and the networks we have built over the past five years. Last year we had 1,666 hours of volunteer labor at the farm. People can save a railway. People can resurrect a proud neighborhood. People can develop a farm. Times are rough these days; it's a good time to remind ourselves that people working together really can make a difference.