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Canada

Learning from our mistakes

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Foreword

You've all heard it before: international development is complex. Yet in this high-pressure environment where funding is often linked to success, it is hard for organizations to admit to their mistakes, making it even more difficult to learn from them.

However, working in a complex environment requires a more thoughtful approach: form a hypothesis, take an action, reflect on the results, then try something different. By iterating and making minute adjustments we discover what works and, just as importantly, what doesn't. Sometimes this means making mistakes, but it's how we manage these mistakes that produces positive results.

In most cases, the mistake itself is not important. Everyone makes mistakes! This report aims to show that it is the conditions that led to the mistake which are most important. It is how we reflect on these conditions that determines the future value of the mistake. And it is how we grow, learn and change as a result of the mistake that can turn failure into success. After all, the only true mistake is the one we make twice.

EWB recently went through the process of identifying our organizational values, and each resulting value shines through in these stories. We **invest in people**, such as our volunteers and their partners, to support personal growth and learning. Our overseas staff **dream big and work hard**, creating



Erin Antcliffe

erinantcliffe@ewb.ca

Overseas Volunteer Staff

Agribusiness Team

Partnered with the

Ministry of Food and Agriculture

Ghana

innovative strategies and taking calculated risks in order to learn what works best. In exploring the complex world of development, we are able to **address root causes for impact**. We **strive for humility** by opening ourselves up to mistakes, rather than ignoring them. We **ask tough questions** about those mistakes, and **courageously commit** to learn from them. Through it all, the bottom line remains the same: we **put Dorothy first**.

This book is not about making mistakes. It is about lessons learned. The stories here describe how EWB has learned from its mistakes, growing into a stronger, more effective organization. As members of EWB, it is your job to hold us accountable. Remember those values which you helped create, and keep asking tough questions!

LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

A collection of pieces from Overseas Staff

Communiquer l'évolution des partenariats



Boris Martin

borismartin@ewb.ca

Directeur de programme
Équipe Entrepreneuriat Rural Agricole
Bobo-Dioulasso, Burkina Faso

Octobre 2009

Je suis assis devant M. Ganamé, secrétaire général de la FNGN, notre partenaire depuis bientôt 3 ans. Il me regarde intensément, comme pour chercher à lire mes pensées dans mes yeux. Je l'entends alors prononcer: «Est-ce que ISF a des objectifs cachés ? On ne comprend pas ce que vos volontaires cherchent à réaliser ici.» Mais je suis sûr que dans mes yeux, la seule chose qu'il peut lire est du dépit. Comment sommes-nous arrivés à un niveau de confiance aussi bas dans cette relation ?

Tout débute en mai 2007

Alain Chung est alors volontaire court-terme. Il fait un travail exceptionnel au service de la direction de la FNGN, un nouveau partenaire de l'équipe ISF. Dans

cette grosse organisation paysanne, chaque responsable des 17 unités d'appui gère un programme de développement pour les nombreux groupements de producteurs affiliés. Alain met en œuvre un petit programme de renforcement des capacités informatiques de chacun des gestionnaires. Cela lui permet de comprendre l'organisation et de répondre parfaitement à ses termes de référence (TDR). Il établit une relation de confiance entre ISF et la FNGN, le début d'un long partenariat.

Août 2007

Simon Michaud, un volontaire long-terme, prend la relève. Sa mission est de poursuivre le travail d'Alain, soit le renforcement des capacités des leaders, et d'identifier la valeur ajoutée que ISF pourrait offrir à la FNGN. Après un tour d'horizon et la construction de relations multiples, il cible l'UAAE, une unité d'appui. L'UAAE se concentre sur l'accompagnement des producteurs dans la gestion de leurs exploitations : le Conseil à l'Exploitation Familiale (CEF). Le CEF semble être un service proche de Dorothee qui porte ses fruits. Simon juge que l'approche mérite que l'on y investisse nos ressources et décide de concentrer son travail au renforcement de l'UAAE et à approfondir ses connaissances sur le CEF.

Août 2008

À la fin du placement de Simon, notre équipe décide de consulter tous ses partenaires, pour définir ensemble notre orientation

stratégique. À ce moment, nous avons l'impression de franchir une frontière dans nos partenariats: un model d'engagement et de communication où nos orientations stratégiques étaient convenues avec nos partenaires. Je me rappelle avoir partagé fièrement ce résultat sur myEWB. À cet atelier, un représentant de chacun de nos partenaires a été convié, dont l'UAAE.

Lors de cet atelier de 2 jours, les analyses et les recommandations de nos partenaires nous poussent à se concentrer sur le CEF. Nous décidons ensemble, en août 2008, de spécialiser l'expertise de notre équipe sur cette approche et d'y insuffler toute notre énergie.

Novembre 2008

Je me rappelle m'être assis avec l'administrateur de la FNGN pour convenir des TDR du prochain volontaire, Etienne Renaud-Roy. Alors que je mettais de l'avant le potentiel de notre stratégie axée sur le renforcement du CEF à l'UAAE, lui se remémorait les ateliers sur l'informatique d'Alain. J'étais déçu que le travail effectué jusqu'à présent à l'UAAE ne soit pas valorisé davantage. Mais à juste titre, il me renvoyait à l'UAAE pour que l'unité d'appui exprime ses besoins par elle-même - et donc que l'attribution d'Etienne se fasse à travers une demande de l'UAAE.

J'ai donc formalisé les TDR d'Etienne avec l'UAAE, en croyant ainsi officialiser le partenariat au niveau de la FNGN. Etienne prend donc la relève de Simon et se lance dans un diagnostic de l'UAAE. Les choses bougent !

Octobre 2009

Environ un an après que le placement d'Etienne ait démarré à l'UAAE, je me retrouve devant M. Ganamé: « Alain Chung a respecté ses TDR. Les autres volontaire, on ne sait pas trop ce qu'ils ont fait ici ». Ouch.

Alors que je pensais que nos partenaires étaient impliqués dans notre stratégie, la FNGN croyait que nous avions un agenda caché. L'équipe de direction avait perdu de vue les allés et venues de nos volontaires, et elle commençait à se poser des questions sur leurs activités. La confiance était au plus bas.

Mes apprentissages

Les hypothèses que j'avais posées se sont avérées invalides: j'avais l'habitude des organisations canadiennes où l'information circule librement. Ce n'était le cas, et j'étais responsable de m'assurer que nos intentions et nos changements d'orientation soient clairs et compris par nos partenaires.

Il était aussi intéressant pour moi de réaliser qu'il n'était pas forcément clair pour nos partenaires que nous avions de bonnes intentions à leur égard. Les changements stratégiques que nous avons opérés, et que nous pensions pour le mieux, avaient généré une perte importante de confiance.

Dans le futur, je m'assurerai que les TDR de chaque volontaire soient compris et signés par tous les partenaires, tout en respectant le protocole hiérarchique pour la communication des décisions. Je ne considérerai pas que de bonnes intentions suffisent à convaincre nos partenaires de notre bonne foi. La transparence est de mise.

LEARNING FROM OUR MISTAKES

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Impact Takes a Perfect Storm



Wayne Miranda
waynemiranda@ewb.ca

Overseas Volunteer Staff
Agribusiness Team
Partnered with
Ministry of Food and Agriculture
Northern Region, Ghana

Problem on the Ground

It is estimated that upwards of 80% of the population of northern Ghana are subsistence farmers—farmers who, often barely, produce enough food for their household. For decades, the Ghanaian Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) has been a primary actor providing services to the farmers in Ghana. MoFA seeks to ensure food security by tracking food production deficits and surpluses. MoFA also seeks to modernize agriculture by developing the knowledge and skills of Ghanaian subsistence farmers.

The challenge Engineers Without Borders (EWB) has observed is that the methods MoFA uses to achieve these national development goals are largely ineffective

and stagnant, dating back to the 1970s. MoFA employs field staff to implement national policies on the ground. Field staff typically execute on methods to improve farm yields and production, as well as dissemination of agricultural technology to modernize agriculture and thus shift away from subsistence. However, farm yields have been stagnant for decades, and technology adoption rates have been very low.

Impact EWB Desired to Have

EWB is working with MoFA to shift subsistence farming to farming as a profitable livelihood, under the Agriculture As a Business program (AAB). Particularly, EWB is partnered with MoFA to develop the resources, and motive for MoFA field staff to transform loose farmer groups into viable farming businesses. EWB developed a field tool for MoFA field staff to use as a curriculum for farmer groups to unite, plan a business, and work together to profitably market their produce.

In the Northern Region, I was working in 2 districts to try and start up the AAB program. Specifically this means to get local staff using the tool EWB created, and more importantly adapting the tool to better serve their farmers. By working alongside local staff, EWB creates the foundation upon which local staff can later innovate and adapt the tool to suit farmers' needs.

What Went Wrong & What EWB Did About It

External Events

A number of events external to my work caused delays in starting the AAB program. In the case of some MoFA staff, it was months before I had the opportunity of meeting them.

1. Ghana's National Election

Field staff with whom I was to work were required to return to their home villages to vote in their respective electoral zones. As a result they were away from their posts and unavailable for training to start the program.

2. Ghana Presidential Re-vote

The national election alone could not decide the presidency. Ghanaians were required to vote a second time to decide who would be President among the top two candidates. This extended the time field staff were away from their posts, and further delayed the program start.

3. Sala Celebrations (Muslim festival)

The region in which I was working has a majority Muslim population. Sala is the most important Muslim festival involving 1-2 days of prayer, feasting, and visiting extended family members. Some field staff decided to remain in their home villages after the election to participate in Sala celebrations.

4. Christmas and New Year's holidays

Often due to transport constraints, field staff did not return to their posts between Christmas and New Year's public holidays.

5. National Fertilizer Subsidy Program

For the past 2 years, a major government investment in agriculture has been a fertilizer subsidy program for farmers. In executing the policy, field staff play the role of distributing fertilizer coupons to farmers. The role field staff played took up to 40% of their time and was tedious with much paper work. In addition they often dealt with long queues of distraught farmers, and were subject to significant public scrutiny involving the National Bureau of Investigation for corruption allegations, which were demotivating for field staff.

As a result of these five major sources of delays and competing priorities, the start of the AAB program was delayed by 3 months—a very significant delay considering it is a quarter of an EWB volunteer's 1-year contract.

Weak District Leadership & Demotivated Staff

Successful implementation of the AAB program hinges on the willingness and ability of district leaders to promote the merits of the program and motivate their staff to participate. In one of the two districts in which I was working, there were serious allegations of corruption against the district leader^[1]. The situation had failed to be resolved over a period of at least 3 years. As a result, the field staff mutinied against the district leader, often boycotting meetings, and failing to conduct routine tasks let alone take on new initiatives such as

[1] Corruption certainly exists in government agencies in Ghana, and developing and developed countries alike. As a cautionary note, it would be wrong for readers to fully attribute the diminished impact by EWB to corruption in Ghana. Corruption was a bottleneck, but not the only bottleneck.

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the AAB program. The work culture was dysfunctional, and the staff were highly demotivated. As a result, the field staff were disinterested in the AAB program, especially because it did not offer tangible benefits like monetary allowances.

EWB has launched a Leadership Development program in response to the challenge of district selection. The Leadership Development program is not designed to solve weak district leadership. Instead, it targets the best district leaders to recognize and reward their performance and spur collaboration and competition between strong and weak leaders. Targeting the best district leaders also informs EWB of which districts should be invested in next.

Prematurely Emphasizing Scale-up

As a result of delays outside of my control, it was decided more districts should be brought on board in order to generate momentum by maximizing the number of field staff progressing in the AAB program. I thought by having a large enough number of staff involved in the program, those on the sideline would feel left out, and gain an interest to also join. Inter-district competition could also spur more interest. I placed more effort working in the second district, and then I started a third district. After initial success of field staff trying out the program, interest quickly weaned off due to competing priorities such as distributing fertilizer coupons to farmers, and other regular field work.

Given that the program was still in early stages, it would have been more appropriate

to generate momentum by working closely with a core group of highly motivated staff. Then to make the adoption of the AAB program more sustainable, I could have developed incentives to promote and reward results in the AAB program. This could have prevented the drop off in interest after the initial wave of momentum. EWB is currently testing incentives to promote results in the AAB program.

Conclusion

This report features a healthy reminder that making an impact requires multiple things to go right. Many factors of success are out of EWB's control and difficult to anticipate like external events and dysfunctional work environments. Other factors of success fail because hypotheses that had informed decisions turned out to be false, such as the best method to generate momentum in the AAB program.

EWB is using a creative solution to deal with the risk of dysfunctional partnerships by means of a Leadership Development program to vet districts in which to invest EWB resources. EWB has also learned from failing to generate momentum, and has started to develop formal incentives within MoFA to build interest and reward performance in the AAB program.

Positionnement lors d'une transition de personnel

Au Burkina Faso comme au Canada, une transition de personnel, particulièrement quand il s'agit de cadres, implique la reconstruction des relations de travail avec les supérieurs, les collègues et les employés. Mon histoire porte sur l'évolution de mon rôle chez mon partenaire, la FNGN, pendant une transition du leadership. Lors de mon placement, j'ai évolué avec une équipe de management qui changea au beau milieu de l'année et j'ai rencontré des difficultés d'adaptation.

Les difficultés que j'ai rencontrées s'expliquent par le rôle que je jouais au sein de mon partenaire avant la transition. Au début de mon placement, j'ai acquis la confiance du responsable de l'époque, qui me donnait une grande liberté d'action. À peine quelques semaines après mon arrivée, le responsable et moi avons pu débiter une relation de coaching professionnel, ce qui nous a permis d'approfondir notre relation rapidement. Hubert me donnait l'autonomie sur mes activités et me laissait organiser des sorties sur le terrain. Il était aussi très ouvert à des idées d'amélioration de l'organisation du bureau (appelé Unité d'Appui) dont il était le responsable.

Trois mois plus tard, le responsable m'informa qu'il quittait son poste en faveur d'un nouveau travail ailleurs au Burkina Faso. Face à ce départ précipité, la direction de la FNGN me demanda de prendre la responsabilité de l'Unité d'Appui en



Etienne Renaud-Roy
etiennerenaudroy@ewb.ca

Personnel outremer volontaire
Équipe Entrepreneuriat Rural Agricole
Détaché à la Fédération Nationale
des Groupements Naam (FNGN)
Ouahigouya, Burkina Faso

attendant le recrutement d'un nouveau responsable. J'ai donc pris l'intérim de mars à mai 2009. Durant cette période, j'avais la responsabilité de toutes les activités de l'Unité d'Appui, en plus de mes responsabilités avec ISF. L'expérience fut riche en défi et en apprentissage, et m'a permis de développer une confiance accrue en mes compétences.

En avril 2009, la direction me demanda de préparer et de participer au processus de recrutement du nouveau responsable. En mai, une nouvelle responsable fut recrutée et la direction me demanda de participer à son intégration. Ainsi, mon ancien superviseur fut remplacé par une femme compétente ayant plusieurs années d'expérience.

À ce moment, avec l'assurance que j'avais développée pendant l'intérim, je me suis

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positionné comme un homologue de la nouvelle responsable d'unité. J'ai aussi gardé à ma charge certains dossiers relevant de la gestion du service qui n'étaient pas finalisés à l'arrivée de la nouvelle responsable. Je croyais pertinent de les conserver vu ma connaissance de ces dossiers et vu les dates d'échéance relativement proches. J'ai ainsi continué à faire le suivi d'un stagiaire, à mettre en œuvre un pilote de conseil de gestion et à élaborer les termes de référence d'un futur volontaire court-terme ISF à la FNGN.

Cependant, en ma qualité de jeune étranger, la nouvelle responsable ne percevait pas mon rôle comme celui d'un homologue, mais plutôt comme celui d'un stagiaire en formation. Ainsi, en voulant reprendre avec elle les discussions sur le management telles que l'ancien responsable et moi avions, mes intentions étaient vues comme un manque de respect par rapport à sa position hiérarchique et à son expérience. Le fait que je continue à gérer certains dossiers était perçu comme un refus de son autorité et de sa compétence.

La grande disparité entre ma perception et celle de la responsable par rapport à mon rôle nous a empêché de bâtir une relation de confiance. Ce problème eu un effet négatif important sur mon travail durant les mois qui suivirent. La plupart de mes idées, propositions et tâches de travail furent freinées par la responsable. Par exemple, lors du conseil exécutif, la responsable n'appuya les recommandations issues de mon travail et elles furent ainsi rejetées.

Le blocage quasi-total de mes activités d'amélioration de l'Unité d'Appui affecta énormément mon moral. Alors que je m'attendais à une équipe de responsables motivés à améliorer l'organisation du travail, je me suis retrouvé seul, sans aucun appui de l'équipe, à cause de mon erreur de positionnement.

Étant incapable de faire avancer mes projets antérieurs, j'ai plutôt appuyé le sous-responsable de conseil de gestion. Certains échos de mes petites victoires et des améliorations remontent maintenant à la responsable à travers lui. Aujourd'hui, en décembre 2009, la relation professionnelle avec la responsable est stabilisée et notre relation est en phase de guérison. Cependant cette erreur aura coûté 3 mois de mon placement et aura ralenti plusieurs innovations prometteuses.

Mes apprentissages

Comme le présente mon récit, les relations de travail peuvent être des freins ou des leviers primordiaux dans le travail d'un agent de changement. C'est dans cette optique qu'il est important pour moi, comme pour les futurs volontaires qui liront ces lignes, de valoriser ces relations humaines même si cela donne l'impression de perdre en efficacité sur le travail. De plus, l'arrivée d'un nouveau superviseur se compare à un nouveau placement pour un volontaire : la relation est à rebâtir et la confiance acquise antérieurement est difficilement transférable.

Balancing Politics within Participatory Processes

One of the great things about being an OVS is that you learn a lot about yourself, people, development, etc. while having significant opportunities to apply your learning to have an impact on Dorothy's life. In a perfect world with perfect people, this learning would occur exclusively through positive experiences. But, since we are far from perfect, mistakes are made sometimes with significant consequences. When these types of mistakes occur, it's essential to learn from them and correct the situation as best as possible.

Background

Approximately 7 months ago I started a new placement with the Lilongwe district government in Malawi. District governments are tertiary levels of government below Regional and National governments. There are 28 district governments in total. They possess similar responsibilities as Canadian provincial/municipal governments but they largely depend on donor money to implement development projects.

I began this new placement with 5 months previous experience partnered with the Ntchisi district government. During my time in Ntchisi I learned many things about Malawian culture, government capacity constraints, rural water challenges, etc. all of which contributed to a valuable sense of comfort and confidence going into my new placement.



Garrett Schmidt
garrettschmidt@ewb.ca

Overseas Volunteer Staff
Water & Sanitation Team

Partnered with
Lilongwe district government
Lilongwe, Malawi

Lilongwe District

My new placement started off well. The Lilongwe district government was keen about the partnership with EWB and I quickly developed strong trust and respect with all of my colleagues. My initial month at the district was agreed to be an "assessment" period where I would meet and gain insight about opportunities and challenges from many of the stakeholders involved in water and sanitation issues at the district.

During my 1 month assessment period, it became clear that the district had challenges related to:

- a. monitoring the functionality of water points in rural communities,
- b. providing adequate maintenance services to communities with broken water points,

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- c. identifying communities without access to improved water sources,
- d. coordinating and regulating the work of NGOs involved in water projects,
- e. communicating effectively among district government offices (e.g. The water office communicating to the health office), national government and donor agencies, and;
- f. ensuring district staff are competent in their responsibilities and resourced adequately to perform duties.

Once compiled, the district and I reviewed these challenges and identified that one of the systemic problems was the lack of information about water points in the district. They possessed small quantities of old information pertaining to functionality rates of water points and which villages had access to clean water and which did not. This old, out-dated information restricted the district from effectively planning which communities received maintenance assistance and which received new water supply infrastructure. The lack of information reduced the district's ability to coordinate the activities of NGOs and effectively communicate their development challenges to the national government and donor agencies. In addition, the lack of information decreased the accountability mechanisms between all stakeholders (i.e. district & national government, NGOs and donors) to perform their duties as required. Therefore, one of the most obvious solutions to address many of these challenges was to establish a water point monitoring system.

System Development

Luckily for me, another OVS Enam Rabbani had made considerable progress on the design and implementation of a water point monitoring system with the Machinga district government. After getting my head around the technical components of the monitoring system and learning from Enam's successes and mistakes, I began to introduce the concept of the monitoring system to the Lilongwe district government. Their response was overwhelmingly positive. Soon we were adjusting the design to fit their context and developing a proposal requesting finances from Donor X in order to implement the system. During this process, we identified that our proposed system could significantly compliment an existing initiative that Donor X already had planned to implement in Lilongwe district.

System Proposal

Following the completion of the proposal, Donor X was invited to attend a district government meeting. I presented the proposal to the Donor X representatives who were impressed by the district government's motivation and although the Donor X reps had many questions, they verbally supported the concept. The decision was made for Donor X to further review the proposal and then to meet again in 2 weeks to discuss any questions and the way forward.

System Rejection and Relationship Problems

Two weeks came and went and the district contacted Donor X to request a meeting to

discuss the proposal for a water point monitoring system. Much to our astonishment, Donor X refused to meet citing the problem as EWB “pushing” the district government to develop the proposal and that once I returned to Canada, the project would cease to move forward.

Needless to say, Donor X’s response came as a huge shock to me and the Lilongwe district government. The implications were immediately obvious. Not only was my work in Lilongwe at risk of not proceeding but, more importantly, EWB’s reputation in the sector was at risk since Donor X is one of the biggest and most influential donors in the water and sanitation sector in Malawi. To make matters worse, the district government personnel were so irritated at Donor X suggesting the process wasn’t driven by them that they were willing to go to extreme measures to ensure their proposed water point monitoring system was implemented. District government personnel made suggestions to find an alternative donor (which would have further irritated Donor X), to report Donor X to the National Water Ministry or to use funding from other Donor X projects to fund the water point monitoring project. It became clear to me very quickly that somewhere along the way I had made a mistake which now pitted Donor X against EWB and the Lilongwe District Government against Donor X.

Pathway to Resolution

After a lot of personal reflection and discussion with fellow OVS and Malawi water sector personnel, the situation started to

reveal its complexity which, like many organization/sector problems, was rooted in politics. Essentially, one individual at Donor X was opposed to the proposed monitoring system because some of the ideas originated from him but had been developed by my colleague Enam Rabbani in Machinga district in cooperation with another influential donor. The fundamental concept of the monitoring system originated from the Donor X employee which he wasn’t fully recognized for and the concept was changed in such a manner that it could be perceived as competing against his current work which related to management information systems.

Once all of this information had been revealed, we made the decision that I would meet with the Donor X employee who was opposed to the proposal and explain the participatory process I had followed with the government as well as EWB’s commitment to ensuring the project received the OVS commitment required for it to be successful. I did not openly address the more political challenge of him not fully being recognized for the original concept or how the proposed monitoring system could compete with his work. I decided that these issues could be resolved with further relationship development and collaboration.

Outcome

This meeting proved to be successful and was one of a series of meetings that eventually resulted in Donor X’s agreement to fund the water point monitoring system. Through additional meetings with Sr. Donor X personnel and the recognition of EWB’s

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exceptional CLTS work, the relationship between EWB and Donor X has strengthened to be very positive and the relationship between Donor X and Lilongwe district government is also back to normal.

Lessons Learned

Throughout the course of this fairly complicated, political situation, I learned some valuable lessons such as:

Understanding the political context of a situation is key before suggesting or instigating an intervention.

I spent a considerable amount of time with the Lilongwe district government understanding their opportunities and challenges, building trust and generating buy-in to the proposed monitoring system. However, I failed to communicate with Donor X during the initial phase of my placement even though I was hoping they'd play a significant role by funding the proposal. When the district government and my expectations did not align with Donor X's response, a tension was created that had potential to sever organizational relationships.

Participatory processes can be powerful in generating a demand for change but restricted access to resources and development sector politics can restrict momentum.

The interest and sense of ownership that I facilitated within the Lilongwe district government was powerful but premature. If the funding had been readily available and there was no potential for conflict with

Donor X, the initial momentum gained with the district could have propelled them to greater accomplishments.

Conclusion

My approach to development has changed as I'm now much more aware of peoples' and organizations' motivations in relation to my own motivations. This in turn allows me to be more aware of when to be patient and when to be persistent with my work, especially if there is an overlap or potential conflict in motivations.

EWB can learn from this experience by understanding the fragile nature of creating change in an African development sector context where multiple stakeholders can be involved with sometimes conflicting ideologies. To become more influential, attributes such as the ability to build trust and the ability to develop innovative, appropriate solutions, which we already do very well, needs to be combined with access to resources (people, finances and materials) to maintain momentum and further develop the solution.

Engineers Without Borders

601-366 Adelaide Street West

Toronto (Ontario) M5V 1R9

T. 416.481.3693 F. 416.352.5360

info@ewb.ca