



engineers without borders
ingénieurs sans frontières
Canada

Starting to think about impact

What is the difference between digging a well, access to clean water and improved health?

What is the difference between building a school and ensuring that children get an education?

What is the difference between having a public display and making Canadians aware of the challenges faced by the world's poor?

The difference is a shift from thinking about what we want to **do**, to thinking about what we want **achieve**. More specifically, it's thinking about what we want help Dorothy achieve.

Dorothy is the mother pounding fufu in Cameroon. She is selling oranges on the street of Accra. She is tending to her kids in Tanzania. She is trying to sell some crops in Senegal.

She is our boss. The one to whom we ultimately report.

From novelty to quality

Five years ago, Engineers Without Borders began with the naïve idea that a bunch of young, well-meaning engineers could change the world. Over the years we have learned a great deal about the complexities of development and the challenges of poverty, but two core values remain from those early days—our entrepreneurial spirit and our commitment to excellence.

Thus far, our entrepreneurial spirit has earned us a reputation as an organization that brings a new energy to the challenges of global poverty. This has earned us accolades, particularly over the past 12 months with 6 international and national awards and features in Sarah McLachlan's music video World on Fire and on CTV evening news.

We have proven our energy, and now the time has come to make good on our commitment to excellence. We can be on the leading edge of creating and implementing best practices on our projects overseas. We can be the best in the country at engaging Canadians. We can be among the most sophisticated organizations when it comes to thinking about impact.

But each of us must be rigorous in learning and thinking about the issues, and be uncompromising in our commitment to Dorothy. Our motto must be to move Engineers Without Borders from novelty to quality.

If we are successful, we can indeed change the world.

Why does it matter to focus on impact?

If you are asking the following question, this document seeks to answer it.

"I am a western engineer interested in the global world, and seeking to use my skills and privilege to help others. What can I do to best promote human development?"

We are interested in international development because collectively, as part of EWB, we want to have a substantial impact reducing world poverty around the world. This is the ultimate impact that we seek to achieve.

And in the course of each of our personal quests to contribute to this poverty reduction, we will have a chance to chart our own paths, to learn and to undertake any number of activities.

And for each activity that we do, for each project that we choose to embark upon, we must always keep in mind: How does this initiative help to reduce global poverty?

If we fail to ask this question, we risk undermining the very reason why we are involved in this work. We risk failing to ensure that our good intentions translate into tangible poverty reduction impact.

This matters both for our overseas work and our work in Canada. It is particularly important for overseas work, because any undertaking in a developing community is high-risk. There are many examples of initiatives that not only failed to help – they actually had negative consequences. In Canada there is less risk – only an opportunity cost that we aren't having the impact that we could.

From intentions to impact example - overseas

Let's take the hypothetical example of receiving a request to build a school building in a community in a developing country – a request EWB has received a number of times.

Initially this seems great – there are millions of poor children who don't have an opportunity for the education needed to break the vicious cycle of poverty. So if we build a school, we can help children to learn, right?

Wrong.

The following example illustrates just some of the challenges of understanding the education equation. This was drawn from "Voices of the Poor".

"Ziem Der lives in Tabe Ere, located in the Lawra District of the Upper West Region. Lawra is in the northern savanna zone. It is Ghana's poorest region, where 70 percent of the rural population falls below the poverty line. Bounded by the Black Volta River and the border with Burkina Faso, it is a low-lying area of grasslands, shrubs, and scattered trees; rain falls sporadically between April and September.

Like most of others in the communities in the area, Ziem lives a hand to mouth existence. When the rains fail, which seems to be every other year now, the family goes hungry. His children do not always attend school because they have to work with Ziem in the fields. He is thinking of sending two away to the city to work as servants for a distant relative, but they do not want them. His children are frequently sick, and one of his wives appears to be going blind.

Distant markets and very poor transportation infrastructure further contribute to farmers' poverty. The rains also have made roads difficult to navigate and have caused many of TabeEre's fragile thatched houses to collapse. Ziem says that the heavy rains and poor yields have been reported to authorities, "but the government is silent. This has made me think that there is no remedy and our situation will not in any way improve."

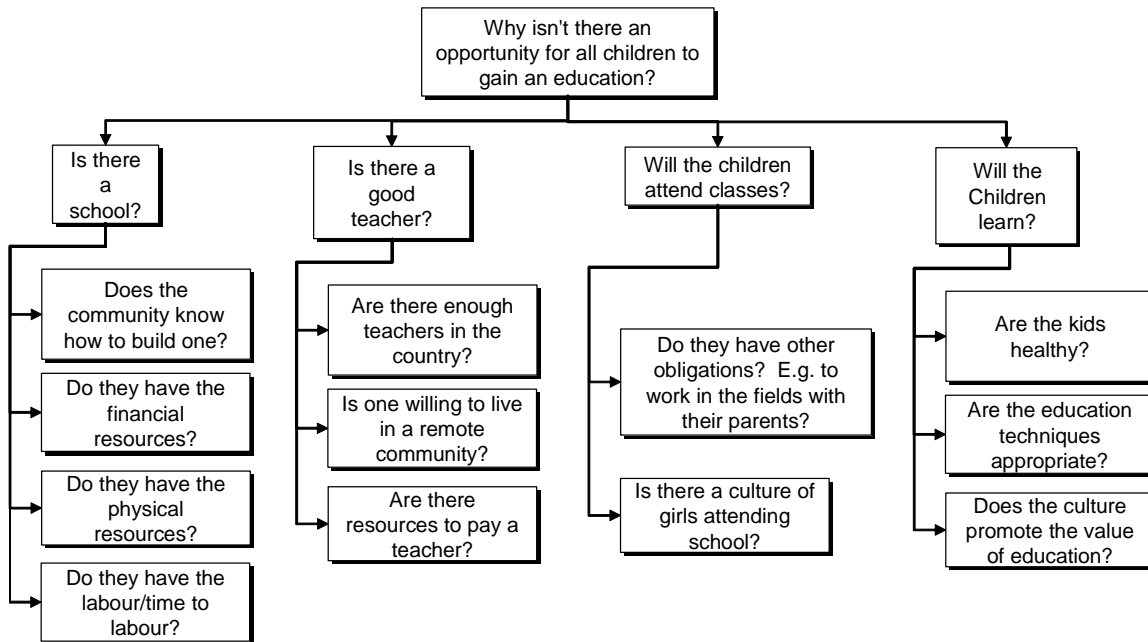
Villagers report that the isolation and bad roads also discourage qualified health personnel and teachers from accepting positions in the community. Those who do take these jobs live in town and commute "as they please," often irregularly.

Those with more land, or better land, or his neighbor with the donkeyplow, can send their children to school (when the teacher is there). Usually, says Ziem, those who can read and write go to larger urban centers like Tamale or Kumasi for work and send back money to their families. Those men, he says, are lucky, "they will have someone to take care of them. They will not die before they can grow old."

What lesson can we draw from this case study?

As an engineer our instincts are to think about the physical school building. But as this case study suggests, there might be many reasons why children aren't getting the education that they need. Based on this case study we outline some of potential reasons why:

Partial Root Cause Analysis



What this suggests is that if we had, as engineers, merely focused on building a school, we wouldn't be addressing the whole problem. Furthermore, although this case study doesn't demonstrate this, the fact is, rarely is the bottleneck the school. People can learn outside, under the shade of a tree for example, if everything else is in place. The simple fact is that usually there aren't enough teachers – especially those willing to move to rural areas to live. And just as importantly, kids frequently have other obligations such as working to earn money, and can't attend.

If in the rare case that it is determined that there needs to be physical school, it might then seem like there is a role for western engineers. But if we probe a bit deeper we are forced to answer the question: Why is there no school?

Is it because people don't have enough knowledge to know how to build one-story buildings? Is it because there isn't enough labour? Is it because there isn't enough money for supplies like concrete or a compressed-earth block making machine?

Usually, the fact is that people know how to build a school – they just don't have the money. So rather than fly down to build a school – donating about half the money of one flight – 1000\$ - would pay for the necessary materials.

Though this is a simplified, hypothetical example, we use it to demonstrate that in a typical project, the intended outcomes usually depend on factors outside the project's control. If these factors (the social context) is not deeply understood and taken into consideration during project planning, then the project might seem to be successful (e.g. "we built a school"), but not the project impact (e.g. "whoops in hindsight I guess we didn't help improve the opportunities for kids to learn. In fact, after we left, the local politician moved into the school with his two wives and converted it to his residence").

There are many more examples of this sort if you are interested in learning more. We will be putting them up on our website shortly.

What does it mean to focus on impact?

Focusing on impact is both simple and difficult.

Simply, it means constantly asking questions like “What impact did my actions achieve?” of “What impact did that project achieve?” or “could I have spent my energies in a more efficient way” or “will the impact of this project last far into the future?”.

But the implications of this are staggering.

It can be an emotionally challenging transformation. At a personal level, it means moving away from the immediate feeling that comes with undertaking activities to further development, and asking questions about outcomes, impact and effectiveness.

It means moving from “I feel like I’ve helped” to “I know and can explain how I’ve helped.”

It also means willing to be critical of other people’s – and EWB’s! – work. This is challenging, because everyone who is doing development work is trying to do good, and one doesn’t want to criticize them. But focusing on impact means moving away from the feel good story, and asking hard-nosed questions.

So focusing on impact – asking these simple questions – is difficult to constantly do. It is much easier to take the easy road, to assume that building a school is doing something good, rather than stepping back and asking the tough questions.

It is also difficult because those simple questions can be very hard to answer. There is no doctrine, no “5 easy steps to focusing on impact”. Rather it is an approach, a tendency to continue to ask questions, to debate answers, to review one’s opinions and to change them as necessary. But overall, it means asking those simple impact related questions.

But if we are able to do this – to ask these questions – it is what will separate EWB from the rest.

EWB Five Personal Impact Guiding Principles

To help those committed to impact to ask the right questions with regard to impact, we have prepared EWB’s five personal impact guiding principles: At EWB, we regularly ask ourselves these questions in our personal lives; we also ask related questions about Engineers Without Borders and the work that we do.

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| 1. I see problems in the world and I resolve to seek to make them better, not for myself but to improve the lives of others. | This is the basis of being part of EWB – wanting to improve the world around oneself. |
| 2. When I act, I act not based on how my actions make me feel, but on the impact that my actions have on the problem at hand and how they affect other people’s lives. | This is the basis of focusing on impact – asking about the impact others that our actions achieved , rather than the activities that we undertook . |

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| <p>3. I measured the impact that I had based on the long term changes I expect to see, not the short term changes.</p> | <p>This question ensures that we are looking at the issue in the long term since we know in development that many temporary solutions fail over time.</p> <p>To be able to answer this question, we need to know frequently experienced reasons for a project to fail over time. This requires considerable knowledge about past similar projects and successes or failures.</p> |
| <p>4. I measured the impact that I had not only on the people I wanted to help, but also on the people in their communities.</p> | <p>This question identifies a frequently overlooked component of the impact question – avoiding zero-sum games. It is important not only to pay attention to the immediate impact on one community, but on the broader region. For example, some projects involve helping one community, and therefore seem like positive impact in the first community, but they actually involve negative impact in a nearby community.</p> <p>To answer this question we need to ask: How will this affect other people, not the immediate beneficiaries of the project.</p> |
| <p>5. I considered the opportunity cost of my actions – and my choice not to act to have impact in a different way.</p> | <p>This question is almost a “bonus question” If we answer the first four well, we are having impact – but what if we could have more impact? What if, say, we decided to work in a job paying \$60,000 a year and donated \$30,000 to an overseas NGO that hired 5 engineers on that salary? Would that be having more impact than volunteering overseas ourselves?</p> |

We would ask that you take a moment to think about your own answers to these questions. You can also use them when other people suggest ideas for things Engineers Without Borders ought to be doing.

While it might seem like they are more focused on overseas there is also a direct relation to work in Canada educating and reaching out to Canadians.

For example, if we applied Principle #2 to high school outreach we would ask: how effective are these presentations at changing the way these students view the world? How can we make the presentations more effective?

As another example, if we applied Principle number 4 to buying fair-trade coffee, we might ask: “What impact does the higher price being paid to the farmers selling fair trade coffee (about 1% of the world coffee market) have on other coffee farmers – or on other farmers in their community? Will higher prices being paid to farmers lead to more farmers planting coffee (contributing the ongoing glut of about 7% in world coffee production)?

Our challenge

As we highlighted at the beginning – there is no easy answer. If we are able internalize this approach of asking questions, and if we follow the five EWB Personal Impact Guiding Principles, we will be a long way along the road of translating intentions to impact.

We invite you to peruse the EWB website at www.ewb.ca/impact to learn more about what EWB as an organization is doing to ensure impact.