

Young engineers expanding their work horizons



Jen Robinson and Mma Chimsi prepare Jatropa seeds for pressing

By Heather Harding
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With a world of possibilities open to them, many young Ontario engineers are making newly informed employment choices. With engineering schools across the country offering new curricula that incorporate issues of environmental sustainability, technology and international development, many recent graduates are looking for work that allows them to apply their engineering education to socially and environmentally responsible projects.

Jen Robinson is one such engineering graduate. Jen recently returned from Ghana, Africa where she had an opportunity to work on an Engineers Without Borders (EWB) placement funded by CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency).

After earning her degree in Metallurgical Engineering from Queen's University, Jen began working for a consulting firm. While the job gave her opportunities to use her engineering training, she felt that something was missing.

"I came across a posting for an EWB placement in Africa and I knew there was a fit," Jen says. "Here was an opportunity that would allow me to combine my education, professional experience and my passion for environmental sustainability."

Once in Africa, Jen worked with EWB's partner organization, the Kumasi Institute of Technology and Environment (KITE), a Ghanaian non-government organization that focuses on environmentally sound technical solutions and related policy advocacy. Jen worked in Ghana for almost a year researching sustainable fuel sources, focusing mainly on the use of Jatropa oil as a biofuel.

"The oil derived from the Jatropa seed has chemical and physical properties similar to those of conventional diesel, and has been shown to be suitable for use in diesel engines in warm climates," she explains. "From an environmental perspective, it is a cleaner fuel than diesel, but the social and economic implications of locally produced fuels are even more important to rural communities. On a small scale, fuel production to power agro-processing equipment in remote communities can translate to increased local commercial activity and incomes."

Jen is just one of the thousands of engineering graduates successfully combining their professional training with an interest in international development. As she sees it, "EWB has tapped into the raw energy of young engineers who are looking to use their engineering training, but are also looking for a direct social or environmental cause behind their work." EWB has chapters at twenty-one universities across Canada.

The Ontario Society of Professional Engineers is a proud supporter of Engineers Without Borders. To learn more about EWB, or to find out how you can contribute, please visit www.ewb.ca.