

Dear EWB colleagues,

I first want to say how much I enjoyed the trip to Ghana. It was invigorating to be with the young volunteers in action. I am full of admiration not only for their passion and energy but for the professionalism with which they are approaching their assignments, and the maturity with which they are collaborating with their counterparts.

I came away very impressed by how EWB has created itself as a cutting edge volunteer organization for human development focused on capacity building.

Personally, it was particularly gratifying because I felt that EWB had wholeheartedly embraced the human development paradigm of development, and is applying it in development practice. Even better, it has wholeheartedly taken on board the lessons of past mistakes in technical assistance that I had long been writing about, and is building a new and innovative approach to capacity building.

Attached is a memo on my impressions of your strengths, challenges, new directions.

With best wishes, as always,

Sakiko

Engineers Without Borders

Issues on its strengths, achievements and challenges Impressions from a one week tour in Ghana

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

After spending an intense week visiting EWB volunteers and partner organizations in the Northern Region of Ghana, I am impressed by the programme. It is at the cutting edge of innovations in development cooperation for human development that has built on the latest thinking about the process of development and what external assistance can and cannot do. EWB is a highly professional outfit committed to excellence and learning. Over the last few decades, myriad analyses have diagnosed the problems of technical cooperation effectiveness but it has been much more difficult to implement reform in major donor agencies. By virtue of being a new and small, it has been able to adopt new approaches that address many of the critical constraints to capacity development. I am particularly delighted to see the organization's commitment to development as human development.

'Capacity development'

EWB has set capacity development as the objective of its projects and this is becoming more clearly articulated and methodically developed. How well is EWB becoming a capacity development organization? Where are its strengths and weaknesses?

The approach and methodology

The most interesting part of the EWB approach for me was that it is doing more to take capacity development as an objective systematically than any other development organization I have seen: first by clearly articulating this objective in setting up the volunteer placement with a partner organization; and second by the volunteer undertaking a diagnostic of capacity gaps and identifying where she/he could help. Most development agencies define capacity development as an objective of their technical cooperation projects, and acknowledge the weaknesses of technical cooperation programmes of past decades on building capacity. The response has been to change instruments - shift out of providing direct operational staff (e.g. there were thousands of French teaching staff in francophone countries in West Africa) to providing advisory personnel, out of long term to short term consultants, and from expatriate to local personnel. The assumption underlying these shifts has been that the model of using local personnel, short term consultants and 'advisory' personnel are effective vehicles for capacity development. This in turn reflects the fact that no real thought has been given to understanding the process of capacity development and to developing methodologies for facilitating and accelerating that process. In fact, this is a glaring gap in the development cooperation community.

What is innovative in the EWB response has been to take capacity development as an objective and to develop a more systematic methodology for achieving it, applying some tools and concepts of organizational change theory and practice. The most recent initiative has been to introduce two specific steps that are undertaken: first, clearly defining capacity development as an objective in the initial agreement to place a volunteer; and second, the volunteer undertaking a systematic diagnostic of capacity constraints in identifying her/his work programme.

In effect, each EWB volunteer is taking on a role as a management consultant to the partner organization. I confess to having been a little skeptical of this approach, considering that the volunteers have much experience or specific training in organization/management. In my meetings with partner organizations, I tried to explore how they felt about this approach. I found them very much more receptive than I had expected. I found that the volunteers were adopting a systematic analysis of organizational effectiveness, that their analyses were appreciated by the counterparts as both professional and sensible, and that the counterparts were ready to implement the suggestions.

Expatriate advisers as 'management consultants' is an important innovation in the practice of technical cooperation. It builds on a conceptual shift from the old model of technical cooperation that assumes that capacity resides uniquely in individuals to one that places capacity at the level of organizational efficiency and effectiveness. Most development agencies recognize that capacity resides at the institutional level, but the response to that challenge has been major organizational reforms and restructuring. But capacity development takes place by incremental change, not radical restructuring.

What makes EWB volunteers effective in this role? I can think of three factors. First, are the personal qualities of the volunteers themselves. They come with strong analytical and problem solving capacity as well trained engineers, to which the four week EWB training has equipped them with some basic tools and concepts of organizational management analysis. *Perhaps EWB should reflect on whether: there is a need for further training in this area; whether selecting volunteers who have more experience and training in management or in the management consultant sector would be beneficial.*

The second factor is the incentive structure for managers in the partner organization. Managers in any bureaucracy would not welcome anyone coming in to critically diagnose their effectiveness unless they felt that they had complete control over the process. The problem with most expatriate personnel sent by donors is that they are too powerful to play such a role and become threatening to the counterparts. Major donor personnel have the ear of top officials (such as Ministers) or of influential donors (such as the World Bank). In contrast EWB volunteers are 'harmless', not only because they are not agents of powerful donors but also because they are young, and would soon be gone if their analysis is not to their liking. In effect, they are the type of staff that is a dream for any manager – smart, energetic, hard working, team players who genuinely want to help. Thus EWB volunteers overcome the system constraints of asymmetric power

relationships that dog the donor-recipient relationships ultimately undermine efforts at capacity development by development aid.

The third factor is EWB's own methodology or paradigm for development cooperation in which building trust is a key element. Volunteers are asked to be proactive in building trust and clearly achieve this by being helpful. Partners interviewed repeatedly mentioned the hard work, dedication, and useful skills that the volunteers have.

As a result of these three factors, EWB interventions achieve what most technical cooperation projects are unable to do, namely foster ownership without which capacity development can never work.

Capacity development for what?

Building capacity of individuals and organizations is not the ultimate end (or 'the bottom line') of EWB. It is the improvement in human lives and expansion of choices that they have to live full lives that we seek. Are the projects that partner organizations are engaged in effective in contributing to those ends?

This is a question which is more likely to arise than not, since development is a risky business. Many many projects are less than effective in delivering real impact. It is not easy for EWB to be associated with projects that are effective. One choice for EWB would be for the volunteers to try to change project design to enhance impact. The drawback of this approach is that EWB is not equipped for that kind of intervention. Another choice would be to select partners that have winning ideas and project design. The drawback here is that some organizations with great need for capacity development would never be helped.

A constructive approach out of this dilemma would be to build into the diagnostic, analysis of impact so that so that this would be more forcefully addressed by the management of the partner organization.

A good example is the Ministry of Agriculture extension services in the Northern Region. This service appeared quite dynamic and was interested in capacity development activities. But the technology being promoted by the extension service did not appear to be a 'winner'. A major part of the technology promoted is to apply fertilizer, in addition to introduction of an improved variety with some improved practices. But farmers complain that fertilizer is too costly, meaning that it was too expensive relative to the benefits. I raised this with the extension worker whose demonstration I had watched, the Yendi district agriculture director, and with the Northern Region agriculture director, as well as other people I met. I was amused by their responses; no one disagreed with the farmer. The extension worker further explained that the main advantage of the variety being promoted was not higher yield but higher nutritional value which meant that farmers were not making more cash income to pay for more fertilizer. But the agricultural extension staff's job is to diffuse the technology developed by the research system, not to invent new ones. What is missing here is a more proactive approach from

the extension services on the ground to feed back these realities to research, or perhaps to develop some field testing initiatives on their own and introduce modifications. EWB in their 'capacity development' activities could focus on finding ways for the extension service to address these impact problems.

Partner organization priorities

Capacity building may be EWB's priority and philosophy but is this shared 100% by the partner organizations? The experience of technical cooperation the world over is that there is a mismatch between the priorities of donors and those of recipients. Recipients are hard strapped for equipment, operating costs and personnel to implement their work programme. Donors want to provide capital finance or 'capacity development'. Capacity development may be an important long term objective but the urgent short time priority is to get the work done. In other words, the recipients actually want 'gap filling' support. They may also want capacity development but they may see it as a luxury given the pressing priorities of getting through their work programme.

It would be a mistake for EWB to focus entirely on capacity development and ignore partner organizations' gap filling needs. In fact, most of the volunteers seemed to be achieving a good balance between gap filling and capacity development activities. And the focus of the capacity development has been to introduce practical tools and training that have immediate and tangible benefits, such as improved forms for reporting and computer training. Most of the partner organizations I met with mentioned computer training first when asked how they have benefited from EWB volunteers.

Would partner organizations prefer budgetary support or nationals instead of Canadian volunteers? All that I spoke to said no, because the Canadian volunteer is not a substitute for a national. They saw value in contacts with the wider world beyond Ghana, the stimulating new ideas that they bring, and the close personal friendship that they develop. No doubt the strong value of EWB to build trust and to integrate into their work environment and local communities is an important aspect of these benefits.

Gap filling and creating dependency

Donors prioritize capacity building because by definition, development cooperation is supposed to be temporary and countries are supposed to 'graduate' and become self sustaining. This tends to be interpreted as doing away with expatriate personnel, and the continued presence of expatriates as 'dependence'.

Perhaps the logic of dependence on expatriate personnel is not relevant any more. We are in the age of globalization when all countries and organizations are somewhat globally connected and recruitment of staff is global. All organizations should be open to global ideas. They can be expected to benefit from continued and permanent presence of expatriate personnel and access to global information and knowledge. Whether it is NewEnergy or the Ministry of Agriculture in Yendi, contact with a Canadian volunteer helps them open those global doors.

I see little danger of creating dependence from EWB volunteers. Aid has created dependence where projects are not viable without donor assistance. Many projects collapse when external support terminates; this is hardly the case with any of the partner organizations.

The individual volunteer leaving something behind

I found EWB volunteers driven by wanting to make a difference, especially to accomplish something tangible that endures. It struck me that some of the volunteers were setting themselves rather unrealistically high goals with too much emphasis on capacity development.

Capacity building is not the only development impact that EWB volunteers are contributing. There are four types of impacts:

- impact on partner organization's capacity through some improvements in the organization's procedures or in the capacity of a counterpart;
- impact on getting work done;
- impact on building global solidarity through personal interactions;
- Impact on Canada's commitment to development.

These four types of impact are all important. The last item, impact on Canada, should not be underestimated. Because of EWB's structure that reaches out to Canadian universities, volunteers have added opportunity to make a difference there.

Recruitment criteria

I was truly impressed by each and every one of the volunteers I met. I was equally impressed by the recruitment criteria you are applying. My only observation is that intellectual maturity may be an additional criterion.

EWB and its mission

For what it's worth, here are some thoughts on EWB's niche and mission in the crowded field of development cooperation.

Having known only large donor organizations – working at the Bank and UNDP, and interacting with large bilaterals and other multilaterals, it was interesting to reflect on the role of a small volunteer organization. I see the following strengths as key, to be built upon.

Small start up - EWB, by virtue of being new and small, run by young people, has the advantage of not having to live with a history. It can be much more innovative and try new approaches. It is a little like a small start up firm in Silicon Valley that does more innovation than large multinationals and whose innovations go to market when they get

bought up by multinationals. I believe that this is what is in fact happening and EWB should build on that strength. So it should be aware that it can be, and indeed is, a cutting edge development organization.

Engineers – the fact that this is a group made up predominantly of engineering students and graduates is significant and should not be lost. EWB can have impact in this particular community in Canada – I was interested to learn about initiatives to introduce more development in engineering curricula. I also felt that the fact that they were engineers helped partner organizations define their expectations more clearly.

At the same time, it is evident that the EWB volunteers are not using much engineering knowledge in their assignments because what they learn in Canadian universities is not applicable to their placements. On the other hand, technology for development is still one of the most neglected areas where progress has been frustrating. For instance, decades of ‘development projects’ to develop and diffuse improved stoves have still had very limited impact. This is probably because the ‘improved stoves’ are not what people want. When there is a technology that people find useful, it does spread – like cell phones that have spread like wildfire in Africa. No one has figured out how to develop technologies that address the enduring problems of poverty. Perhaps EWB can. (see Easterly’s book on his comments on Shell’s initiative). So partnering with ‘intermediate technology’ organizations and placing individuals who may have the skills to work on some of their challenges may lead to something new.

Management consultants? – yes, why not think of yourselves as internal management consultants for public sector and NGOs in developing countries.

Social mobilization specialists? - No. It is clear that the biggest challenge in human development at the micro level is mobilizing communities to help themselves. So it is tempting to conclude that it is not technology that is lacking but social mobilization, and to try to become experts in ‘participation’. The trouble is that there are many many development organizations already trying to do this. EWB has built its strength around engineers. Why not keep that profile.

EWB is a unique organization and can build further on what it has become and build on its strengths.