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ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS: AN ASSESSMENT Ian Smillie – July 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review deals primarily with EWB's work in Malawi and Zambia. It includes and assessment of the quality of EWB volunteers and the value they add in their postings. It also deals with wider questions about capacity building, learning, reputation, influence and future program direction.

Is EWB creating the best development workers? If they aren't the best, they are certainly *very* good. They are eager, enthusiastic, sensitive, deeply inquisitive and hard working. They are carefully selected, well trained and well supported. These attributes are observable, but they are corroborated by their managers and co-workers, and by the requests for replacement and new volunteers. Most are having a direct and positive impact on the projects and people with whom they work.

EWB is adding value, building useful and needed capacities among development workers, projects and its partner organizations. Its work on M&E is important and innovative, and is recognized as such by partner organizations. EWB is building a solid internal foundation of experience and knowledge on specific countries, sectors and approaches. The challenge now, one that exercises volunteers and staff alike, is how to build on this foundation so that the whole can become greater than the sum of the parts.

Engineering faculties and African engineering universities too often strive to emulate their high-tech Western counterparts. They might be very happy to host EWB teachers on their faculties, but their curricula are often far removed from engineering needs and realities in Africa. EWB should approach the posting of volunteers in institutions of higher education with caution.

There is discussion in EWB about creating its own delivery projects in sorghum, cassava or other agricultural value chains. It may be tempting to think that EWB could do this kind of work better than other, larger organizations. It is also conceivable that a donor could be found to finance the experiment. EWB should, however, be very careful about venturing into its own projects until it has a fuller understanding of large-scale cash crops with chequered histories.

There is discussion within the organization of "a more professional EWB". There is an opinion that EWB may be held back by its youthful volunteer image and that while this gives it strength in Canada, it may be a liability in Africa. According to this view, if EWB is serious about placements with government and educational institutions, and if it is serious about influencing policy, it will need older, more experienced, more seasoned volunteers, and the staff to go with them.

The organization's reputation and influence, however, will not be much enhanced by increasing the average age by four or five years. Reputation and influence will flow

from the quality of EWB's people and their ability to work well with local partners – and by EWB's ability as an organization to learn, document, remember and disseminate lessons that have meaning for other practitioners and policy makers. This is addressed in some detail in the report, and it speaks directly to EWB's ambition to become an organization that can influence and change the direction of development assistance – at a personal level, and within organizations and sectors – in ways that are important to the lives of ordinary people in developing countries.

In many ways, EWB revisits the 1960s volunteer-sending model, with an emphasis on young people, but with an insistence that its volunteers must add value. Skills, of course, are not enough, and EWB has recognized that if Canadians are going to make a real contribution to development, especially among rural communities, they must be able to understand local realities, local cultures and local constraints. They must be able to speak knowledgeably about things they know, but they must be able to listen; they must have the confidence to lead, but they must also be able to follow.

EWB has shown great skill in the recruitment, selection, training and placement of volunteers. They do add value, and they are valued by their partner organizations. The organization is poised in many ways to do much more, and some of this is discussed in the report. With the right kind of support and encouragement, EWB will make it happen.

SUMMARY OF SUGGESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Two Year Postings: When asked what EWB could do to improve, people at all levels of partner organizations suggest that the one year posting should be increased to two, something EWB has been considering. Two years is more typical for a professional overseas posting, and given the amount of training and support EWB provides, better economies and greater effectiveness would be the logical outcomes of longer postings.

Critical Mass: EWB is probably not big enough yet in its core countries to build the reputation and visibility it seeks. There are currently eight or nine long-term volunteers in each country. The organization probably needs double that number to achieve the desired visibility and impact.

Other Partners: EWB should consider more placements with government, and possibly within donor organizations, in order to understand their constraints, priorities and methodologies.

Remembering and Documenting EWB's Own Lessons: EWB is gaining important knowledge about the two sectors in which it has chosen to work. In addition, volunteer postings are revealing many of the generic shortcomings in aid planning and delivery. EWB needs to internalize the lessons it is learning, it needs to test and retest them, and it needs to find a way to remember and document them so that they are not dissipated in the regular cycle of volunteer postings and staff turnover. It needs to know more about its chosen sectors than simply what is going on today, and it needs to know more than what can be learned from its own hand-on experience.

Discovering and Documenting Others' Lessons: There have been projects in water & sanitation and agricultural value chains in Africa for 50 if not 100 years. Little is generally known by today's practitioners about these efforts – what was achieved, what was learned, what worked, what did not, and why. EWB could build its own knowledge and that of others by reviewing, summarizing and disseminating relevant historical development literature. EWB's strength is people; it has many active participants at home; it has short- and long-term volunteers. Each of these groups could contribute to building a historical data base on EWB's areas of focus.

Ex Post Facto Evaluation: Most development projects are evaluated within their own lifetime. There is very little *ex post facto* evaluation, and almost no effort anywhere to examine the lasting impact of projects that were completed two or three years back. The absence of memory is one of the development community's greatest weaknesses.

EWB should consider undertaking its own review of the surviving impact of past aid projects, successful or otherwise. Again, EWB's strength is people, and a review of, say, successful sorghum projects completed over the past five years or so might yield very interesting and relevant information. The point of this would be to learn and to document as much as possible in as short a space of time as possible, to make an impact with the findings, and to make EWB the go-to organization in its areas of focus.

Make EWB's Priorities CIDA's Priorities: EWB aims to be an independent voice, getting field realities to decision makers; here is a ready-made challenge: to draw Canadian ODA more directly into areas that promote rural development through better and more entrepreneurial food production, input supply and marketing.

African University Students: EWB should think about twinning short and possibly longer-term EWB volunteers with students from African universities and polytechnics. A partnering/mentoring arrangement could offer African students some very practical insights into local development realities, better equipping them for the real world they will encounter upon graduation. They could also be a great help to newly arrived Canadians. EWB might also give some thought to the creation of an experimental EWB chapter on an African university campus.

Formalize EWB's Status in Programming Countries. EWB volunteers are all currently posted under the authority of a host organization, which arrange work permits and other formalities. This has worked well up to now and can continue to work, but if EWB wants to influence governments, it must be *known* to governments, and must have formal agreements for its activities – especially if more of these are to fall directly under EWB auspices, rather than those of a host organization.

Cars, Offices and Field Staff: EWB's field staff in Malawi and Zambia work very hard, and they work long hours. Their laptop is their office, they travel in buses, and they live under very Spartan conditions. Far *too* Spartan. EWB should reduce some of their burden by providing each of them with a car, some secretarial support and a basic office. It may be felt that this way lies bureaucracy, but the current way is penny-wise and pound-foolish. It creates an impermanent if not amateurish impression, and it will undoubtedly ensure that staff turnover and/or burnout is high.

Change the Name of EWB’s “professional chapters” to something else – “off campus” or “city” chapters. If you have “professional” chapters, it suggests that the others are not professional.

A further suggestion is made in the text about investigating the possibility of replicating a honey project that EWB is assisting in Zambia.

I. Background

Terms of Reference

The TORS for this assessment of EWB covered a wide range of subjects. In summary, EWB wanted four broad areas of questions answered.

- First is an assessment of our results: What has been EWB’s impact across our three major goals (Developing great Canadian development workers? Helping partner organizations to function more effectively? Influencing the sector)? In which instances/circumstances have we had more impact?
- Second is an assessment of our internal operations: What components of our internal operations appear to be functioning well? In what areas are there improvements?
- Third is a assessment of our strengths and weaknesses and trajectory: how has EWB changed over the past 12-24 months? What does this suggest for future directions?
- Fourth is an assessment of our future potential: What are the challenges/opportunities in the sectors where we operate? What role could EWB play? What would be some areas for us to work on in order to build the capacity to be able to play that role effectively?

These main points were fleshed out with a series of more detailed questions.

Methodology

The terms of reference for this evaluation were agreed in March 2008. A half-day briefing was held in Toronto May 22, including several of the EWB senior staff as well as EWB’s Southern Africa field staff, Brett Stevenson and Ka-Hay Law. EWB provided detailed documentation on its plans, processes, volunteers and partner organizations, and a further briefing was held by conference call on June 28, connecting EWB Toronto, Malawi and Zambia.

Field work took place between July 7 and 17 in Malawi and Zambia. Meetings were held with most of the long-term volunteers and some of the short-term Junior Fellows in both countries as a group. I met alone with each long-term volunteer individually to discuss their placement and the EWB process. I met with several partner organizations: Concern Universal, WaterAid, the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture and Total Land Care (TLC) in Malawi; and CARE, UNICEF and PROFIT in Zambia.

Meetings with partner organizations were organized in different ways. In each case I met with program or country managers. I also met with project staff and with staff working directly with EWB volunteers. This involved spending the equivalent of a full day on most postings. For example the meetings with Concern Universal (CU) were held at Ntcheu, about 150 kilometers from Lilongwe. I reviewed the EWB dossier on CU and was briefed by Brett Stevenson on the background to EWB's work with the organization (she had been a volunteer there herself). I met separately with Megan Campbell, the current volunteer, with the project's senior manager who traveled from Blantyre for the purpose, with a group of CU water and sanitation program staff, and separately with individuals in the M&E unit where EWB has placed its main emphasis.

Because there were several meetings like this in relation to each partner organization, I was able to gain a better-than-average view of EWB's institutional relationships, the work and contributions of its volunteers, and the challenges they face.

I owe a real debt of gratitude to all of the volunteers and partner organizations in Malawi and Zambia who gave so generously of their time, and a special thank-you to Brett Stevenson and Ka-Hay Law who made the visit go so well, so pleasantly, and without a single hitch. Except for *the Blue Room*.

What's in this Report and What is Not

This report focuses almost exclusively on EWB's overseas programs, and more particularly on the work of the long-term volunteers. Because I spent time in Malawi and Zambia, those countries and the way EWB operates there are the focus of this report. There is little substantive coverage of EWB's Canadian programs beyond what I heard from staff and volunteers.

Most evaluation reports are written in the third person and often in the passive voice: "The team was told this; the team was told that." Because I did the work alone, I have written the report in the first person and have not distanced myself from conversations I had with staff, volunteers and their partners. The tone of the report is therefore a little more "personal" than many.

I am very conscious of the fact that outside evaluators are prone to long lists of recommendations, often without reference to the historical, practical and financial constraints that might prevent their acceptance. I did not study EWB's financial situation, and realize that some of my ideas have implications that may be unrealistic.

Finally, I have not actually made many "recommendations" in the report. I was impressed by what I saw, and if EWB made no changes at all, it would still be a vibrant and effective organization. EWB is ambitious for change in the world, however, and the foundation it has created in a few short years can be a springboard to much more. In most cases, therefore, I have made "suggestions" rather than recommendations, and hope that they will help EWB as it charts a course into the coming years.

II. Development Outcomes and Results

In its 2008 Year Plan, EWB states that it will be measured by its impact in four of its goals:

- Creating the best development workers;
- Being the best development capacity building organization;
- Being a strong and independent voice for Dorothy;
- Designing more direct engineering and technology programming areas.

These goals are supported by programming operations (recruitment, selection, training, coaching); foundational elements (a strong personnel pipeline; health and safety issues, fundraising, links with Canadian programs) and strategic issues (thematic programs and EWB's overall influence on specific programming sectors and donors).

A Brief Word on Dorothy

“Dorothy” is a collective concept created to describe the people EWB works with and aims to assist. To the newcomer, “Dorothy” sounds a little contrived, if not corny, but the idea is infectious, and it is a useful icon that can be interpreted in many ways.¹ The Dorothy concept is pertinent to some aspects of what follows.

A. CREATING THE BEST DEVELOPMENT WORKERS

Discussion

“Best” is a relative term, one that invites a degree of cynicism in a development world that is fraught with problems and failure. Technical assistance has long been criticized for its high cost, the insensitivity of foreign workers and the low sustainability of their contribution. Volunteer-sending organizations have, since the 1950s, been predicated on lower costs and greater cross-cultural sensitivity, but the effectiveness and the sustainability of their contribution remains in question. It remains in question in part because it has rarely been properly assessed, and in part because it is assumed by many donors and host organizations that “volunteers” cannot, and need not, be taken as seriously as “professionals”. The volunteer *idea* is usually justified as much on the grounds of what the volunteer will learn as what s/he will leave behind. It is often described as a kind of cross-cultural learning experience that will help to breed the next generation of professional development workers.

EWB volunteers do gain a lot from their experience, and some will undoubtedly go on to careers in international development work, better equipped for it by the EWB experience. But that can be taken as a given, and that aspect of EWB will not be

¹ Tyler Algeo, a volunteer in Zambia, described Dorothy this way: “Dorothy is my boss. She is the boss of everyone in EWB, including the Co-CEOs Parker Mitchell and George Roter. At the end of the day, all the work we do is for her. She is an archetype. I don’t remember quite how the concept developed and got the name Dorothy, but that’s how we know her. She is the millions of people out there living in extreme poverty. She is our client. Whether she is a man or women, old or young, etc. All those faces you see on World Vision advertisements. Each one of those faces is Dorothy.”

evaluated in this report. This report will concentrate on EWB's stated goals, rather than the unstated and the obvious.

Without reference to other organizations which aim to create "development workers", it is hard to say if EWB volunteers are "the best", but EWB takes this goal very seriously and goes to great lengths to make every posting as effective as possible. Through its chapter system in Canada, potential volunteers are sensitized to development issues and EWB. A volunteer may have been active in an EWB chapter for three or more years before actually applying for an overseas posting. Through the summer placements of undergraduate Junior Fellows (JF), a cadre of people with enthusiasm and field experience is maintained in the campus chapters, and EWB's advocacy work in Canada is constantly refreshed and informed by direct overseas experience.

Some of the long-term volunteers (OVS) are drawn from those with a JF experience, and so several of the current placements bring experience of another country and another work experience.

EWB runs an intensive, one-month residential training program in Toronto for its OVS, a short in-country training program upon arrival, and at least one "retreat" where volunteers gather to discuss their placements, development issues and EWB. These are perhaps standard features for most volunteer-sending organizations. Where EWB differs, is in its requirement that volunteers spend three to four months living on their own with a local family, usually in a rural area. Most live in extremely rustic settings without water or electricity, often with families who speak no English. They depend almost completely on public transportation for travel. Volunteers quickly become functional in the local language, and develop a view of African life from an African perspective. It is evident from what the volunteers and their counterparts say, that this experience is key to a volunteer's effectiveness, and to EWB's success. EWB is ambitious for change, but it instills the kind of humility in its volunteers that is needed to understand what change can be achieved, what cannot, and where they fit into the equation.

A key to effective placements, of course, has very much to do with job descriptions and the expectations of both the volunteer and the host organization. EWB expends a great deal of effort in the development of its relationship with partner organizations. Several in Southern Africa have had more than one volunteer over the past two or three years, so there is now greater mutual understanding. Several managers in partner organizations told me that their initial expectations of EWB were low, and that they anticipated something like the "typical" Peace Corps or VSO volunteer. When pressed on what "typical" might mean, several talked about people who are somewhat disengaged, cliquish, frequently away on holidays, and who often require considerable care and feeding. Senior managers in CARE, UNICEF, the USAID-funded PROFIT and others spoke of their pleasant surprise at the ready ability of EWB volunteers to "fit in" and to understand the rural reality that their projects address. This results from good selection and training, but the village experience is probably paramount.

I was impressed by the level of "coaching" that each volunteer receives from EWB. This includes regular visits and phone calls (most have cell phones with text

messaging capacity), and detailed discussions about the posting, the job, the host organization and the actual work that is being done. EWB field staff have an impressive knowledge of the work being done by each volunteer, and actively coach them on ways they might advance their work. EWB is focusing primarily on agricultural value chains and water and sanitation in Southern Africa, and the volunteers in these fields are in regular contact with each other, sharing knowledge and experience.

EWB was eager for me to spend as much time with the volunteers’ counterparts as with their managers. Here I probed for indications that a volunteer might have been over-eager to get a job done, displacing local staff, or that s/he might have pushed too hard in a situation where an outsider could be given undue credence. I heard very few comments of that sort. Most comments were like those of a very articulate Zambian woman working in a rural setting on an agricultural project. She has worked with three EWB volunteers who have focused on the project’s M&E component. The volunteers, she said, have helped them to think about M&E in new ways, going beyond outputs and thinking about ways of understanding farmers’ behaviour that might change or improve the project’s longer-term impact. “They are neutral,” she said, meaning that they do not represent project management or donors, “so they are not afraid to ask questions about whether something is working, and if it is not, why. They are like an extra eye, and the EWB investment in their learning has enabled them to contribute effectively and quickly.” These were common themes throughout my discussions with partner organizations, especially at field level.

Not all EWB postings “work”. I spoke to one volunteer who had missed half of the Canadian training and whose job posting fell through at the last moment. He was placed in another job where the likelihood of success was, and remains, limited. He spoke somewhat derisively of EWB’s desire to make “big changes” in the development world: “Inside, we’ve already drunk the Kool Aid; we have to be more realistic.” That said, however, he appreciated the effort of the field staff to work with him, and to create good teamwork in the region. Working in a value chain operation, he can learn from what other EWB volunteers are doing, and because he works in a government department, he can provide useful insights for others on how government operates. He understands that EWB is not about giving him an opportunity to change something directly or overnight, and he is willing to stick with his job for another couple of months, with an agreement that a transfer will be arranged if it finally proves not to work. “I’m OK with a longer-term victory,” he says, “about contributing to something bigger in EWB. But,” he adds, “you do need good postings.”

Late in my visit, I started taking a straw poll, asking EWB counterpart workers and managers who had known at least three or four volunteers to give them a collective rating on a scale of one to ten, where one would be poor and ten excellent. The results were very positive.

Area	Colleague 1	Colleague 2	Colleague 3
Adding Value	10	8	9
Level of Cultural Understanding	7	9/10	10
Level of Technical Understanding	8/9	8	6
Becoming Part of the Team	8	8	8

Many EWB volunteers post Internet blogs. Most of these describe the work they are doing and give a sense of what they are learning, as well as the enthusiasm with which they approach their assignments. See, for example, <http://hansewb.blogspot.com/>.

Conclusion

Is EWB creating the best development workers? If they aren't the best, they are certainly *very* good. They are eager, enthusiastic, sensitive, deeply inquisitive and hard working. They are carefully selected, well trained and well supported. These attributes are observable, but they are corroborated by their managers and co-workers, and by the requests for replacement and new volunteers. Most are having a direct and positive impact on the projects and people with whom they work. Comments about EWB's wider institutional impact are discussed below.

Recommendation

Two Year Postings: When asked what EWB could do to improve, people at all levels of partner organizations suggest that the one year posting should be increased to two, something EWB has been considering. Two years is more typical for a professional overseas posting, and given the amount of training and support EWB provides, better economies and greater effectiveness would be the logical outcomes of longer postings.

Presently, volunteers have an option to extend if the partner organization agrees, and some do. There is a concern, however, that some of the volunteers in the field today would not have applied if the commitment had been for two years. While a two-year commitment might therefore reduce the recruitment pool, EWB has a very large catchment area, so this should not be a fundamental problem.

B. BEING THE BEST DEVELOPMENT CAPACITY BUILDING ORGANIZATION

“Capacity building” is a much overworked term that can be used to mean many things. There are capacity problems in government at local, district and national levels. There are capacity problems in communities and among their leaders. Civil society and donor organizations all have capacity problems, and these have been identified in one EWB paper or another.

I did not read Sakiko Fukuda-Parr's 2006 report on EWB until I had completed a draft of this report, but she raises good questions about capacity building. The first has to do with whose capacity. Another is Capacity for What? A third has to do with whether the partner organization actually wants or expects its capacity to be enhanced beyond the utility of an extra pair of hands. In other words, do partners see EWB as a gap-filler more than a capacity builder? Are these two views mutually exclusive? If yes, is gap-filling a bad thing?

Volunteers

EWB's first effort in capacity building is the volunteer and the effort to create good development workers. As noted above, it does this well. Questions about "greater professionalism" will be addressed later in this report.

Partner Organizations

In the short and medium term, EWB is unlikely to build the generic capacities of large organizations like CARE and UNICEF.² Even with a specific plan to do so, the objective would be ambitious and perhaps somewhat overconfident. EWB does, however, build organizational capacities in two ways in specific locations:

Strengthening Overall Delivery Capacity

By focusing on two workstreams (Watsan and agricultural value chains) EWB is developing a body of knowledge about what works and what does not. The volunteers learn from each other, from field staff and from EWB background papers. The more specific focus in some postings on monitoring and evaluation has made a direct contribution to project and organizational learning and effectiveness.

Building the Capacity of Individuals

In working at the delivery end of a variety of projects, EWB is developing a more critical understanding of development issues. It is beginning to conclude that some partner organizations are overly donor driven, or are unable to learn from experience. The same is not true, however, for their employees, many of whom are eager to learn and to advance. I was struck by the number of employees in one of EWB's partner organizations who were holding down a demanding full time job and at the same time studying – unassisted – for master's degrees. EWB volunteers are identifying what they call "development champions" – individuals working at different levels of an organization who are deserving of special training and attention. Some of these individuals have been brought to Canada to participate in EWB debates and training sessions. Even if these individuals do not advance the effectiveness of the organizations in which they work, they are likely to remain in "the business" and the assistance provided by EWB will not be lost.

Other Potential Partners

Most of EWB's partner organizations in Southern Africa are international organizations. There have been only a handful of local NGOs and government postings. Placements with international organizations are likely to be more structured than others, and if a major international organization could be affected positively by EWB, the spin-offs might be large. Arguably, however, the primary EWB impact will

² It might be possible, however, to build wider institutional partnerships with some INGOs. The CARE Zambia Director suggested that EWB Canada might work out some kind of framework agreement with CARE Canada or CARE USA. CARE Zambia now has experience of EWB and could serve as a reference for postings elsewhere in the CARE world, and with CARE HQ. This could eventually lead to greater EWB influence at a higher institutional level.

be localized, and it might be asked whether EWB should be “subsidizing” large organizations that should have the capacity to handle their own capacity building.

Where institutional capacity building is the objective, a strong case could be made for working more with local civil society.

In order to fully understand the constraints on development delivery, it is important as well to understand how government works, and a case can be made for more postings with government bodies. These may be less rewarding for the volunteer, but in terms of a wider understanding of a sector, they may be essential.

And finally, it may be worth considering one or two placements with a donor organization to get an understanding of their interests, methods and constraints. The Canadian High Commission, for example, might be interested in having a volunteer – perhaps on a trial short-term basis, to assist with the Canada Fund, local M&E needs and the like.

A Sector

EWB aims to influence partner, government and donor programming in two thematic areas – agricultural value chains and water and sanitation. It is acknowledged that immersion in projects is important to a good understanding of field realities, rural livelihoods, implementation challenges and organizational capacity gaps. EWB also understands that experience matters. One EWB paper suggests that change will take years or even decades, but in others, and in discussions with staff, there is a sense of urgency and a belief that EWB can make big changes.

EWB will soon be a venerable ten year-old organization – no longer young, no longer a novelty. If it is going to make inroads on how lessons are learned and applied in a particular development sector, it will need to address several difficult questions:

- How many one-year (or two-year) postings will be required for EWB to become as knowledgeable about a sector as an organization like UNICEF, CARE or WaterAid?
- Until EWB can demonstrate that it *is* as knowledgeable as others, why would older, more established organizations pay attention?
- How will EWB remember what is being learned through its volunteer postings? There is a plan to begin producing “Agricultural Learning Notes”, but how will these differ from the dozens, if not hundreds of newsletters being produced by development organization already?

Conclusion

EWB is building useful and needed capacities among development workers, projects and its partner organizations. Its work on M&E is important and innovative, and is recognized as such by partner organizations. EWB is building a solid internal foundation of experience and knowledge on specific countries, sectors and approaches. The challenge now, one that exercises volunteers and staff alike, is how to build on this foundation so that the whole can become greater than the sum of the parts.

Some Suggestions

Critical Mass: EWB is probably not big enough yet in Malawi and Zambia to build the reputation and visibility it seeks. There are currently eight or nine long-term volunteers in each country. The organization probably needs double that number to achieve the necessary visibility and impact.

Other Partners: EWB should consider more placements with government, and possibly within donor organizations, in order to understand their constraints, priorities and methodologies.

Remembering and Documenting EWB's Own Lessons: EWB is gaining important knowledge about the two sectors it has chosen to work in. In addition, volunteer postings are revealing many of the generic shortcomings in aid planning and delivery. EWB needs to internalize the lessons it is learning, it needs to test and retest them, and it needs to find a way to remember and document them so that they are not dissipated in the regular cycle of volunteer postings and staff turnover. It needs to know more about its chosen sectors than what is going on today, and more than what can be learned from its own hand-on experience.

Discovering and Documenting Others' Lessons: There have been projects in water & sanitation and sorghum, maize, cassava and other agricultural value chains in Southern Africa for 50 if not 100 years. Little is generally known by today's practitioners about these efforts – what was achieved, what was learned, what worked, what did not and why. EWB could build its own knowledge and that of others by reviewing, summarizing and disseminating relevant historical development literature. EWB's strength is people; it has many active participants at home; it has short- and long-term volunteers. Each of these groups could contribute to building a historical data base on EWB's areas of focus.

Ex Post Facto Evaluation: Most development projects are evaluated within their own lifetime. There is very little *ex post facto* evaluation, and almost no effort anywhere to examine the lasting impact of projects that were completed two or three years back. The absence of memory is one of the development community's greatest weaknesses, and the absence of any interest in actually building memory is its greatest failing.

There is nothing to stop EWB from undertaking its own review of the surviving impact of past aid projects, successful or otherwise. Again, EWB's strength is people, and a review of, say, successful sorghum projects completed over the past five years or so might yield very interesting and relevant information.

One of three or four books that I think should be compulsory reading for all development workers is *We Don't Know How* by William and Elizabeth Paddock.³ The Paddocks undertook an independent audit of a range of donor and NGO projects in Mexico and Central America in the late 1960s. They asked implementing agencies for a list of successful projects that had been completed at least three years before, and they then traveled 25,000 miles to see what remained. What they found was as

³ *We Don't Know How: An Independent Audit of What They Call Success in Foreign Assistance*, William and Elizabeth Paddock, Iowa State University Press, 1973.

instructive as what EWB might find if it were to undertake a similar exercise in its programming countries.

The point of all this would be to learn and to document as much as possible in as short a space of time as possible, to make an impact with the findings, and to make EWB the go-to organization in its areas of focus.

C. BEING AN INDEPENDENT VOICE: INFLUENCING DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

EWB says that in order to “help make Canada the most pro-development country in the world, EWB members engage Canadians, raising their awareness about the urgent need for human development. Our members regularly run events aimed at engaging Canadians in the fight against poverty. From car smashes, asking people to ‘smash poverty’, to treadle pump demonstrations at local farmers’ markets, to the hosting of all-candidates debates, EWB members are getting the word out.”

EWB has supported the “Make Poverty History” campaign, it promotes the Millennium Development Goals and it lobbied for the passage of Bill C-293. It promotes the Fair Trade movement, runs school programs for 12-16 year olds and promotes the inclusion of development studies in university engineering programs. This evaluation has not tried to assess these activities, although they are certainly to be commended.

It is conceivable, however, that EWB could have a greater impact on Canadian development assistance, in keeping with an EWB strategic focus for 2008-9: to “build a comprehensive program to influence donors”. Agriculture value chains speak to two important but much neglected development issues: agriculture and the promotion of the small-scale enterprise necessary for both input supply and marketing. CIDA’s “policy suite” includes detailed policies on “promoting sustainable rural development through agriculture” and “private sector development”, but only the latter is a “priority sector” for CIDA, and much of it is related to Canadian investment in developing countries.

Suggestion

Make EWB priorities CIDA’s Priorities: EWB aims to be an independent voice getting field realities to decision makers; here is a ready-made challenge: to draw Canadian ODA more directly into areas that promote rural development through better and more entrepreneurial food production, input supply and marketing. This would be no small job, but so what? You people are *engineers*.

D. DESIGNING MORE DIRECT ENGINEERING AND TECHNOLOGY PROGRAM AREAS

Engineering Education

EWB has embarked on a new program of engineering education. This is still in the formative stage and there is, as yet, not much to assess. In talking with EWB field people. However, a few thoughts come to mind.

First, is engineering education a “workstream” in its own right, or should it be developed in a way that facilitates other workstreams? I would opt for the latter.

Engineering faculties and African engineering universities too often strive to emulate their high-tech Western counterparts. They might be very happy to host EWB teachers on their faculties, but their curricula are often far removed from engineering needs and realities in Africa. EWB should approach the posting of volunteers in institutions of higher education with caution.

African University Students: As a complement, or as an alternative, EWB could think about another possibility: twinning short and possibly longer-term EWB volunteers with students from African universities and polytechnics. A partnering/mentoring arrangement could offer African students some very practical insights into local development realities, better equipping them for the real world they will encounter upon graduation. They could also be a great help to newly arrived Canadians. E.W.B. is an acronym for Engineers Without Borders, not necessarily or exclusively *Canadian* Engineers without Borders. EWB might give some thought to the creation of an experimental EWB chapter on an African university campus. Dorothy doesn't live exclusively in the village; she also goes to college – or at least her kids do.

An adjunct to this idea might be partnership with a specific university faculty or faculties that could advance EWB's knowledge and advocacy in agricultural value chains and water and sanitation.

My Own Private Idaho: Direct Programming

There is discussion in EWB about designing direct programming areas. As I understand it, some thought is being given to actually assuming direct responsibility for a value chain – such as CARE's sorghum operation in Zambia when its funding runs out.

It may be tempting to think that EWB could undertake a project like this and do it better than CARE. It is also conceivable that a donor could be found to finance the experiment. EWB should, however, be very careful about venturing into its own projects until it has the fuller understanding that is suggested above, especially in large-scale cash crops with chequered histories.

There is one area, however, that may offer a possibility. EWB's work in Zambia with Forest Fruits and its honey project could have possibilities for replication elsewhere. Forest Fruits has taken almost a dozen years to learn about honey, and to match small-scale suppliers with what was always a ready market. Nothing in building this

business or the value chain was easy or straightforward, but there now appears to be reasonable – almost exciting – success.

Beekeeping is a much promoted “strategy” for rural development. Hundreds of beekeeping projects have been tried by NGOs and others in developing countries, but few succeed or reach any meaningful size because they are usually all about “beekeeping” rather than the promotion of a commercially viable value chain between small-scale producers and the consumer. It would be interesting to see if the important lessons learned by Forest Fruits in Zambia could be transferred to any of EWB’s other program countries. A first step would be to investigate honey production and marketing in Malawi, Ghana and Burkina Faso. If the situation were to look at all promising, a next step might be to ask the owner of Forest Fruits, Dan Ball, to consider short-term study visits to one or all of the other countries, to examine possibilities. This is a long shot that might lead nowhere, but EWB has people who could do some of the preliminary legwork and follow-up, and it might lead to a manageable, achievable, concrete EWB project through which EWB could learn and grow.

III. A MORE PROFESSIONAL EWB

During my discussions with EWB volunteers and staff I heard a lot of discussion about “a more professional EWB”. I heard that EWB may be held back by its youthful volunteer image and that while this gives it strength in Canada, it may be a liability in Africa. According to this view, if EWB is serious about placements with government and educational institutions, and if it is serious about influencing policy, it will need older, more experienced, more seasoned volunteers, and the staff to go with them.

Views like these, if turned too quickly into action, could herald a world of hurt for EWB. Older, more experienced volunteers are likely to come with higher expectations than those straight out of university. They may be less adaptable and less flexible, and they may not take well to a three or four month rural living experience. They will be more demanding of field staff. The older they are, the more likely they are to have a partner, and even children, and with that, complexity and costs rise exponentially.

On the other hand, EWB already has several volunteers in Malawi and Zambia who are “older” (some as old as 30...). Several did not pass through the university EWB chapter system, but found EWB through its “professional” off-campus chapters. Most (but not all) have fared well, and have been socialized into the EWB culture without much evident pain and suffering on either side. It is already possible within the current system, therefore, to find and successfully place people who have more job experience

Nevertheless, EWB should evaluate the comparative strengths and weaknesses of fresh graduates and more seasoned volunteers before it makes any major decisions to change the mix or to create a third tier of volunteers. The head of an EWB partner organization told me that in his view, the EWB people are already “very professional folks; very focused. Being more professional,” he said, “is not always about what you know, or having more experience. The PhDs at research institutions say you need ‘professionals’ to do agricultural extension, but if you need PhDs to work with

farmers, it will never work. That kind of professionalism is too complex for farmers. Professionalism is an attitude as much as anything else; understanding the end game; an ability to analyze and overcome problems; confidence; attitude, and the ability not to take over.”

I found it interesting that very few EWB volunteers are actually involved in projects or activities that are heavily based on engineering. There may be an engineering component, but even where there is, engineering may be less than 20% of a volunteer’s job, and many of the postings could be handled by someone with a more general education. Several managers in partner organizations told me, however, that engineers have an analytical mindset. They are problem solvers. They understand the logic of systems, and they don’t need to be educated on the principles of water, sanitation or the mechanics of food processing.

Someone else told me that EWB should be careful not to become “MBAs Without Borders”. This is a good warning. EWB is *already* engaged in finding, training and placing people who are professionals, some with more experience than others. The organization’s reputation and influence will not be much enhanced by dialing up the average age by four or five years. Reputation and influence will flow from the quality of EWB’s people and their ability to work well with local partners – and by EWB’s ability as an organization to learn, document, remember and disseminate lessons that have meaning for other practitioners and policy makers. This is the thrust of Section B, above, and it speaks directly to EWB’s ambition to become an organization that can influence and change the direction of development assistance – at a personal level, within organizations and sectors – in ways that are important to the lives of ordinary people in developing countries.

A few additional suggestions:

Formalize EWB’s status in programming countries. EWB volunteers are all currently posted under the authority of a host organization, which arrange work permits and other formalities. This has worked well up to now and can continue to work, but if EWB wants to influence governments, it must be *known* to governments, and must have formal agreements for its activities – especially if more of these are to fall directly under EWB auspices, rather than those of a host organization.⁴

Cars, Offices and Field Staff: EWB’s field staff in Malawi and Zambia work very hard, and they work long hours. Their laptop is their office, they travel in buses, and they live under very Spartan conditions. Far *too* Spartan. They have had the volunteer experience and have proven their worthiness. EWB should reduce some of their burden by providing each of them with a car, some secretarial support and an office (even if it is a spare room in their home⁵). It may be felt that this way lies bureaucracy,

⁴ I was told that to register in Zambia, an international NGO must form a local board of directors, and that EWB is “not ready for that yet”. Why not? A local board should not be seen as an alien influence. It could be made up, at least in part, of people EWB already knows and works with – its “champions”. It could be said that to resist local involvement in programming and decision making is to deny Dorothy a place inside the organization.

⁵ But the “home” has to be something a bit more comfortable than the one-lightbulb room that Ka-Hay Law lives in.

but the current way is penny-wise and pound-foolish. It does create an amateurish impression, and it will undoubtedly ensure that staff turnover and/or burnout is high.

Change the name of EWB's "professional chapters" to something else – "off campus" or "city" chapters. If you have "professional" chapters, what are the others – chopped liver?

IV. OVERALL CONCLUSION

As a one-time CUSO volunteer, field staff officer and Executive Director, I can relate to what EWB is doing, its aims and objectives and some of the constraints. After the first flush of volunteer-sending through CUSO, Peace Corps, VSO and others, the idea of volunteer-sending began to change in the 1970s and 1980s. As developing countries produced more of their own graduates, there was less demand for unseasoned young people from the North. Agencies began recruiting older, more experienced individuals, and with that came added complications and expense. Often the enterprise was justified in terms of what the volunteer would learn, rather than what s/he would contribute. Volunteer sending began to look anachronistic, even passé, and in numbers it was overtaken by short-term internships and youth exchange programs that provided an international experience without much ambition in terms of adding value or doing a job.

In many ways, EWB revisits the original volunteer-sending model, with an emphasis on young people, but an insistence that its volunteers must add value. EWB is not an Outward Bound for engineers. It is very serious about the contribution they and the organization can make, and it is ambitious to expand its impact. EWB arrived on the scene when a lot of developing countries were reassessing their technical assistance needs, when they were becoming less concerned about doing everything with domestic human resources and were more willing to host people with needed skills.

Skills, of course, are not enough, and EWB has recognized that if Canadians are going to make a real contribution to development, especially among rural communities, they must be able to understand local realities, local cultures and languages and local constraints. They must be able to speak knowledgeably about things they know, but they must be able to listen; they must have the confidence to lead, but they must also be able to follow.

EWB has shown great skill in the recruitment, selection, training and placement of volunteers. They do add value, and they are valued by their colleagues and those they report to. The organization is poised in many ways to do much more, and some of this is discussed in the report. With the right kind of support and encouragement, EWB will make it happen.