

# Dorothy: Our Boss

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Anyone brand new to EWB was remarkably confused when Christian, an overseas partner to EWB, stood up at the 2009 national conference and told delegates, “I am your Dorothy.” But within the EWB context, it made perfect sense. “Dorothy” is a concept used by EWB members everywhere to remind us of the person we ultimately answer to. The reason why we do the work that we do.

**We affirm that one stakeholder matters ahead of all others: the members of the developing communities with whom we work. We constantly ensure that our activities meet their needs.**



**EWB Charter**  
2003

**“Daso and Abdeneku work hard on their small farm in Maourolu, Mali to create a better future for their five children. Abdeneku volunteers as a mechanic for the village grinding mill and Daso is a leader in the women’s group. Unfortunately, they eat only once a day. I spent over a month living, working and laughing with them. The future of their family is what matters most to me.”**

Levi Goertz,  
long-term overseas volunteer, 2005

**Abla was the mother of the household where I stayed in Ghana. This incredible woman opened my eyes to the fact that what we call poverty is about much more than not having enough food. She worked a 72-hour workweek outside of the home as a hairdresser, in addition to cooking and cleaning for a family of five. She got five hours of sleep a night. I’ll never know if she was content, but what got me was this: if she’d had a dream of getting more than five hours of sleep a night, I couldn’t see how she’d be able to fulfill it. What could she change?**

Danny Howard,  
Junior Fellow, 2005

**I am committed to Julie, Joyce, Doreen, Sharon, Temwani, Taona, Mercy, Mrs. Mbambara, Mosley and the many other Zambians who touched my heart. In the way that Dorothy is a special reminder to many, these many are a special reminder to me. I know that it is my responsibility to effect change.**

Suman Sidhu,  
Junior Fellow, 2005

**I actually sat on my bed and said to myself, “What would be best for Dorothy?”**

Jeff Beyer,  
Junior Fellow, 2006

**I think the concept of Dorothy is a great internal tool. Many have their own personal Dorothy - someone who really stands out, who motivates your actions, who personifies everything. But for those of us who haven’t gone overseas (a majority of EWB members), we don’t have this actual person, and Dorothy keeps us focused on the ultimate stakeholder.<sup>4</sup>**

Francis Kung,  
chapter member, 2007

**Who is Dorothy to me? Irene, who lived in Kpedze along the Togo border. She was a mother, head of Mille Novisi, a women’s cooperative. She processed kernel oil for about \$1.67/day, worked the fields, raised her children, and took her crops to market to sell—all in the course of one day. Or Mr. Andrews, a palm wine producer, a beekeeper, and a natural born entrepreneur. They were incredibly proud of their work and progress, and their commitment to building a better life for themselves and their children was evident in every hour they were awake. I was always humbled by the drive and ambition of people who were able to carve out a livelihood despite lacking access to many of the resources I had been gifted simply by having been born in Canada.<sup>5</sup>**

Ka-Hay Law,  
long-term overseas volunteer, 2007

**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 . . . She is the millions of people out there living in extreme poverty.<sup>1</sup>**

Tyler Algeo,  
Junior Fellow, 2007

**Though I've met many people on this journey who mean a lot to me, my version of Dorothy remains an abstraction. My Dorothy doesn't have a name or face. To me, she is a simple, powerful way for EWB to stay grounded and focused.**

**With one word, even the most intellectualized conversation about theory, strategy, policy, or process is instantly brought back to what really matters. Just one mention of Dorothy cuts through all the crap and brings everyone back to the ground.<sup>6</sup>**

Thulasy Balasubramaniam,  
long-term overseas volunteer, 2009

## **“At the end of the day, all the work we do is for her”**

**Ian Smillie,**  
in *Engineers Without Borders: An Assessment*<sup>1</sup>

**“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.**

Early in the morning of January 29, 2003, the first day of that year’s national conference, George and Parker wrestled themselves awake at 5:30am to finalize details. With three hours to go, they had no idea how they were going to open the conference. On a lack of sleep, tempers were short, and the stakes seemed high: three hundred passionate EWBers were gathered together to imagine the organization’s future. Back then, few EWB members had direct experience working with the people we are trying to serve. Members were proposing ideas for EWB to undertake, and while many of these ideas were intriguing from the standpoint of a western engineer, they would not have been realistic from the perspective of someone in a developing country living on less than \$2 a day. George and Parker were arguing with each other over finding a way for all of us to remember that we aren’t working for ourselves, that EWB isn’t about our experiences, and that our work, ultimately, can only be measured by the people we are working for in developing communities. As they disagreed about the best way to do this, Parker remembered an HIV/AIDS worker he had met a few months earlier. He reminded George about her, and they agreed that her story would make the perfect opening for the conference.

As the delegates gathered together, finishing up their breakfasts and coffees, Parker went to the front of the room and started telling the story of a woman named Dorothy who worked with CARE Zambia. She had seen her own sister fall sick, back before anyone in Zambia knew what HIV/AIDS was. When her sister eventually died, Dorothy took over care of her four children – in addition to the three children Dorothy was already raising on her own. Dorothy had, in fact, chosen to have only

a few children in order to ensure she could put them through school; now, with seven children, that no longer seemed possible. Amidst her responsibility as a caregiver and the continuing illness of relatives and acquaintances around her, Dorothy began to work tirelessly on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, eventually leading CARE's efforts. As Parker finished telling her story, he said that now, when faced with a decision, he asked himself what Dorothy would want him to do.

Throughout the next three days, the impact of this story was apparent. Parker had told it to share how Dorothy played a role in his own decisions, but the story had become meaningful to many of the delegates, who asked themselves throughout the sessions and workshops, "What would Dorothy want us to do?" The trend continued, and not long after the conference, a few people were starting to refer to this as "the Dorothy test" – before taking any action or decision, we would put it through the Dorothy test, and ask what her perspective would be.

**Telling us about Dorothy was a great way to bring the immense complexities of poverty down to a level that we could better grasp. It was simple, yet powerful and motivating.**

**Tess Ocol**  
2003 conference delegate

Years later, the Dorothy test is still alive in this organization. EWB members don't always think of the HIV/AIDS worker in Zambia when they think of Dorothy - they might think of Christian Nawej, and his determination and intelligence. They might think of Victoria Anamo, a Technical Officer in the Ministry of Food and Agriculture in Ghana, who says she loves her work because, "I see that my people are suffering and I feel that it is out of ignorance. I see that if they gain understanding, it can improve their lives." They might think of Madame Genevieve, an entrepreneur in Burkina Faso running a soap factory, who proudly stamps bars of soap with the word "Dignity".

"By talking about Dorothy, we didn't mean to oversimplify," Parker says. "There are 900 million people in sub-Saharan Africa, and we aren't

working with all of them, and there isn't one person who represents all of them. But we wanted to have a person to remind us of who we are working for – a group that is mostly extremely poor, mostly rural, mostly female. Someone to remind us that EWB doesn't exist to work for our members – we work in the service of something – someone – else.” Over the years, these many faces of Dorothy have been shared through EWB, as overseas volunteers return and talk about the people they think of when faced with a decision, the people that they want to be able to answer to.

### **“Recall a poor person we have known”**

EWB members have created a culture in which we each think of Dorothy when making decisions. As Thulasy Balasubramaniam, a chapter member and long-term overseas volunteer, says, “This is incredibly powerful, this ability for an entire organization to root itself in reality, to continuously check and correct its course, to keep itself accountable, to keep itself unified - all with one word.”

Thinking of Dorothy when each of us makes decisions is, in a way, exactly what development guru Robert Chambers advised in his book *Ideas for Development*.



... When in doubt ... recall a poor person we have known. . . Ask what she would have us do. It is to ask what she would wish, advise, encourage and allow. This . . . demands imagination, reflecting upon the realities of the poor person, her aspirations and ideas of the good life, the example she sets, and our own recognition of causality and how our own decisions and actions are connected with her and others like her. And she can also be he. The question then is whether, when faced with daily and strategic dilemmas and decisions, asking what that poor person would have us do can be a guide, putting some of the responsible into well-being as a part of right and good living. Can it make it easier to see what to do? Can it stiffen commitment and courage? Can it show how those who are poor, powerless and deprived can gain more of what they need and deserve? Can it point to ways of transforming power and seeking social justice? Can it ease anxiety and be a source of peace of mind? Above all, can it inspire good action grounded in realism?<sup>2</sup>

Colleen Duncan, a long-term overseas volunteer working in Malawi, shares how the idea of Dorothy pushed her forward in making decisions. When asked who Dorothy is to her, she has many answers.

“Dorothy is not one person to me,” she says, “but many faces and many stories that represent the hopes and struggles, the successes and daily challenges that are experienced by some of the individuals I meet.” She thinks of the children who greet her everyday. Of Christina, a mother participating in an NGO irrigation project and contracted to grow potatoes for a local company. Of Max, a farmer whose dedication and hard work led to such success that he has been able to expand his farm, increase the number of types of crops he grows, and secure markets in local hotels for his produce. Of Brenda and Tears, her Malawian family: Tears works as a car mechanic for an NGO, and sees and talks to more farmers than many other staff, yet hierarchy means he is never consulted for his opinion. Brenda is raising four children, operating two small businesses, and finishing high school through evening courses.

Finally, Colleen thinks of Yana, an 18-year-old girl in Chisasiko village who can neither read nor write and whose family doesn’t believe in sending girls to school. “Her opportunities are limited,” Colleen says, “not by virtue of her intelligence, but by her context. She is one of the kindest people I’ve ever met.”

Even though Colleen interacts with Dorothy everyday, she still uses the concept as a check to ensure she is making the right decisions. For instance, at one point in her placement, she felt stuck as she tried to decide between two courses of action. Up until then, she had been working to improve the partner organization’s monitoring and evaluation skills, and she could see the success of that work and the potential of continuing it. At the same time, she also saw the opportunity to work more closely with small-scale farmers to ensure a contracted purchaser and guaranteed price arrangement for their crops. She didn’t have the time and resources to be able to concentrate on both streams

of work. As a self-described perfectionist, she was reluctant to leave the monitoring and evaluation component until it was exactly right. “I was feeling stuck, unsure, and afraid to finish my work on monitoring and evaluation and move on to this new stuff.”

After a few weeks at an impasse – unwilling to leave her current work but knowing that she needed to move forward – she consulted with another volunteer, Megan Campbell.

Megan listened carefully and then said, cautiously, “Colleen, it is easy to keep working at monitoring and evaluation, seeing the potential, feeling like just one more day will make all the difference. But . . . how is this helping Dorothy?”

There was a long pause.

Finally, Colleen said, “I don’t know.”

She began to cry.

“I am telling you this,” Colleen says when recounting the story, “because I think we do not always know where we are going, or how exactly to create the change we want to see. I am telling you this because it is easy to get caught up in the day-to-day tasks and to lose sight of the purpose and our goals. When that happens, Dorothy grounds me in reality.

“When Megan asked me that question, an image of Yana flashed through my mind. Her face, her life. It was the kick I needed to ask the tough questions, to examine what I was doing, and to keep me focused.”

### **“Champion and amplify the voice of Dorothy”**

Dorothy determines decisions of individual EWB members such as Colleen and Megan; she also guides decisions for the organization. George shares a story about how EWB continues to bring this Dorothy perspective to the development conversation.

At a meeting of volunteer sending organizations and Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) representatives in 2009, a meeting about engaging Canadians in international issues, George found

himself discouraged and disappointed. After nearly an hour of talk, no one had raised the subject of what all of these organizations were ultimately working towards. Instead, the conversation centred around requests for funding, results reporting, and the complications of CIDA contribution agreements and contracts.

Honouring EWB's commitment to "bring Dorothy to the table", George asked the CIDA engagement representative, "You're in charge of CIDA's efforts to catalyze a change in how Canadians relate to the world. What's your vision of a Canada that will bring more justice to someone like Amado, a farmer I know in Northern Ghana?"

"It was the only time during the meeting that there was any discussion about what we collectively are trying to achieve," George reflects.

He went from that meeting into a meeting with the CIDA minister and other volunteer sending organizations. The conversation kept going back to results frameworks and volunteer figures, even though the CIDA minister was trying to steer the discussion toward Canada's upcoming hosting of the G8. With the expansion of the G8 to the G20, and the rise in power of countries such as India, China, and Brazil, Canada's position is shifting. George spoke up about how Canada could use this change to bring power to Dorothy: "Canada has a chance to champion and amplify the voices of the people all of us are working for. We're seeing a fundamental shift of power in the world, and Canada needs to lead rather than resist this. It will require vision, boldness, and a willingness to do what's right – and it's something that we will ultimately be proud of."

Reflecting on the meetings, George says, "People in development aren't badly intentioned, but, as a sector, we aren't thinking and talking about Dorothy enough. People in Zambia, Malawi, Ghana, Burkina and elsewhere simply don't factor into conversations around cost ratios or results frameworks. Every single EWB member has Dorothy in our hearts and in our ideas, and it's essential for us to strengthen this in

order to achieve the change we want to see. We need to make sure this is absolutely always central to EWB, and that it's what we are bringing to the world around us even when cost ratios and reporting templates might get in the way. We are here to serve Dorothy, to amplify her voice, and to help her gain more power by using some of our own."

### **"Where will EWB be in 25 years?"**

Ever since George and Parker wrote "Engineers Without Borders" on a napkin, EWB has grown rapidly. As we continue to grow and change, it remains crucial that we keep our Dorothy perspective alive. We need to maintain an easily understood, organization-wide tool for reminding ourselves of our ultimate commitment.

A number of our mentors have used their experience to reinforce how important this commitment is. Ian Smillie, for example, has decades of perspective to share. A Canadian development expert, author, and longtime advisor to EWB, Ian told us what could happen when volunteers have different "ultimate commitments" in mind.

After finishing university, Ian volunteered in West Africa with CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas). 25 years after that experience, his CUSO group got together in Toronto for a week-long anniversary reunion. Ian – who had served as their Executive Director from 1979-1983 – was invited to speak about CUSO's long-term impact.

"I said that I thought we had missed the boat in a way," Ian recalls. "We had thought that the overseas experience was just a start, and that when we got back we would revolutionize Canadian thinking about development. And we hadn't done that. We'd lost the plot.

"But the reaction to my comments was negative: many of the CUSO volunteers looked back at it thinking, 'We didn't join CUSO to change the world, we joined to have an overseas experience. Don't tell us that we failed, because we didn't aim to revolutionize development.'

"Where will EWB be in 25 years?" Ian wonders.

It was stories such as Ian's that warned us how easy it is to become self-absorbed. Instead of remembering the people we exist to serve – Dorothy – it would be easy to get caught up in “providing an experience”, serving our own members, putting the interests and experiences of EWB members before the people we strive to work for. Having an organizational touchstone, Dorothy, is the way we keep a constant reminder of who we are accountable to.

Dorothy is not a one-time reminder, not something we address once and then forget. The idea is a code for how we live and work, a constant mindset, a goal we will always, always continue to work towards. 25 years from now, we aim to still be accountable to Dorothy.

Apoorva Balakrishnan, a Junior Fellow working with the Ministry of Food and Agriculture (MoFA) in Ghana in 2006, kept a blog while overseas. She wrote a moving entry about the people she lived and worked with, urging all of us back in Canada to remember them:

It's that frustration, it's the permanently emphasized difference between my chances, and their chances; my ability to choose regarding my life, and their inability, that just makes me cry with anger and frustration sometimes. I won the lottery, I randomly happened to be born to my parents, where they are, and not to Mr. Abudu Seidu, hardworking farmer of Mekongo, striving to make ends meet, his children proud farmers, even though one (shyly admitted) wanted to be a nurse. Or even to Madame Mercy, the Best Yam Farmer in Ghana (!!), of Kpandai town, who is slogging day and night to pay her children's school fees.

I'm writing this, and I'm sharing this with you because I feel compelled to do this; it burns in my throat, that choked uncontrollable sorrow and childlike complete mistrust of the world and its ways, that feeling of utter betrayal by fate and morality and human accomplishment, that Mr. Abudu, and Madame Mercy, can dream the same dreams for their children as my parents dreamed for me, and it is conceivable – nay, it is very likely, that their children will never, ever achieve them. Not because they aren't capable, but because of the inequality in the way the things we have described as wealth and power were distributed.

So now, after months of explaining to my family and friends and strangers why I am here, and what I am doing, I have fully grasped and comprehended the purpose of my stay in Ghana. Beyond building capacity at the MoFA office, beyond training the agricultural extension workers in better teaching techniques, beyond organizing a district food security network; I am here because the ideologies, the big words and poverty-reduction strategy papers, and UN Conferences have all become redundant (in a way) and reduced the singular pressing need to do something regarding the inequality in the world. The inability for people to make choices regarding their lives. I am here because the people who have become my people, my family, my neighbours, my friends, these people are struggling and I need to take that message home.

Because poverty exists during Mother's Day, and poverty exists during the cottages opening on May long weekend, and during the annual Winnipeg marathon, and during Folk festival and when you are drinking coffee and eating a donut in Tim Hortons, and even, even when you pad down the stairs in your pajamas and see the perfection of a late August sunrise and think 'oh, how beautiful' – because precisely at that moment of small, and secret joy, someone somewhere in the world, someone whom I love, someone who has become my family or my friends, will look at a similar sunrise, thinking only of how to feed their children, how to get by. And their heart will be beating the same as yours, their blood, mostly plasma, some erythrocytes, like yours, but that joy? That hope, that dream, that ability to see in the sunrise a latent potential for adventure and daybreak and possibility? I can only hope that you will take action so that that can be the same as well.

<sup>1</sup>Smillie, I. (2008, July). Engineers Without Borders: An assesment. Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Retrieved February 15, 2009, from EWB: <http://www.ewb.ca/mainsite/pages/whoweare/accountable/smillie.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup>Chambers, R. (2005). Ideas for Development. Earthscan.

<sup>3</sup>Howard, D. (2007, April 1st). Danny in Malawi. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from Blogspot: <http://dannyinmalawi.blogspot.com/2007/04/its-8am-i-can-hear-traffic-pass-behind.html>.

<sup>4</sup>Kung, F. (2007, Feb 1st). MyEWB. Retrieved August 11, 2008, from MyEWB online discussion: <http://my.ewb.ca/home/ShowPost/21322#21449>.

<sup>5</sup>Law, K.-H. (2007, February 25). Kumvera; "Something Old, and Something New". Retrieved July 25, 2008, from Blogspot: [http://kumvera.blogspot.com/2007/02/something-old-and-something-new\\_25.html](http://kumvera.blogspot.com/2007/02/something-old-and-something-new_25.html).

<sup>6</sup>MyEWB discussion. (2007, April 11th). Retrieved July 25, 2008, from myEWB : <http://my.ewb.ca/home/ShowPost/26333#60253>

<sup>7</sup>Balakrishnan, A. (2006, May 28). "Inflamed-Confused Open Letter" Blog: Apoorva's Ninja Adventures: EWB in Ghana. Retrieved July 25, 2008, from Blogspot: <http://apoorva-in-ghana.blogspot.com/2006/05/inflamed-confused-open-letter-may-25th.html>