

Redefining Development: In Ghana, what can a month do?

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A little over a year ago, I found myself looking out the window. The gray clouds hung low like smoke in the sky, hiding the landscape of mountains and ocean. The west coast rain fell in constant staccato, hypnotizing me as I sat in my Global Studies class at Vancouver Island University (VIU). A door clanking shut broke my diverted attention, and I was quickly pulled back into the classroom environment. We were discussing "international development in the third world". Many questions popped into my mind. The terminology set off warning signals in my head. First, when using the term "development" I feel that I am perpetuating the notion that the majority of the world lacks civilization. I feel like I am placing the Western way of life on a pedestal that all nations of the world should be striving for. When the fact of the matter is, if everyone lived with such luxury, we would need multiple planet earths to sustain ourselves. Can't I differentiate between countries in ways other than the 'developed' and 'undeveloped', or the "first world" and the "third world"? But what terminology is not ethnocentric? Perhaps "exploitative countries" and "exploited countries", or the "greedy countries" and the "oppressed countries". Nope, I realized this was too negative. I wanted to create some positivity to shed some new light on this situation. So, back to the drawing board...

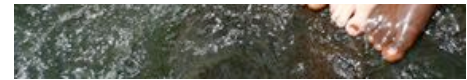
The disparities between the rich and the poor have been growing steadily, resulting in increasingly fewer countries being able to provide for their citizens. I suddenly remembered terms I had heard before, "minority countries", referring to the Global North, and "majority countries", referring to the Global South. I think these terms reflect the goings on in the world without putting an ethnocentric spin on the words. These terms reflect the way our global system has ultimately shaped the world in which we live. More people are poor than are rich, that's just the way it is, but is it really? Aren't there ways we can change this? Maybe through development, but not if development means turning the existing majority countries into consumer-based individualistic societies. These questions remained unanswered at the back of my head.

A couple weeks had passed by, it was mid-semester, and you know what that means... mid-term time! My agenda was chock-full of assignments, tests, and papers. The questions I had about development seemed to have floated somewhere into oblivion. It was Monday morning and I was still in my usual "early-morning-stupor". I was trudging my way up the stairs, when I noticed a new poster on the bulletin board. It was for the Ghana-Canada Partnership for Environmental Education. The word 'partnership' caught my eye, causing me to read further. The poster explained that this five-year CIDA-funded partnership was a collaboration between VIU and two colleges located in Ghana: Sunyani Polytechnic (S. Poly), and the Sunyani Faculty of Forest Resource Technology (FFRT). Once a year, a team of VIU students and professors go to Ghana for a month, and once a year a team of Ghanaian professors and students (if the Canadian embassies allow), come to Canada for a month. During this time lots of action would take place, and plans would be made to ensure continuation during the time spent apart. I discovered that the aim of the project is to help reduce poverty through environmental education in Sunayni, the capital of the Brong-Ahafo region, and surrounding areas in Central Ghana. Based on extensive community needs assessments, the project is focussed on participatory education and knowledge transfer surrounding HIV/AIDS, bush fire management, water sanitation, eco-tourism, and waste reduction. Coincidentally, applications for the project were due the next day. I was intrigued by this project because of the emphasis on the word partnership, so decided to apply.

Fast forward to January 2008: I heard word that I had been accepted to the project, departing that April, and would need to start meeting weekly as soon as possible. I was excited, but still unsure of what my future had in store. Bit by bit, the unclear became somewhat less foggy. I learned that the project was focussed on the participatory approach to education, ensuring that all levels of learning would take place, and that the participants were always fully



engaged. I also learned that one of the fundamentals of the project was 'knowledge transfer'. Meaning that knowledge would be learned differently from the traditional 'expert model' of a teacher passively lecturing students.



Instead, it would be an interactive exchange back and forth. Knowledge transfer emphasizes the fact that we all learn from each other, that not one of us is more knowledgeable than the other. It highlights the different life experiences we have grown from and can teach others. My fuzzy ideas began growing clearer as I realized we would not be the ones dictating what would happen within the community. Instead, we would be there to facilitate and assist where needed. In other words, this development project would be focussed on empowering, rather than dictating. Perfect, I thought to myself, this all sounds good in theory, but can it really be applied? I guessed I would find out soon enough.



The familiar hum of the airplane's engine resonated in my ears. As the plane lifted off the ground from Amsterdam headed south to Accra, the capital city of Ghana, I could feel that I was moving towards a defining period of my life. My eyelids began to grow heavy, and despite the loud snores of the passenger sitting beside me, I fell into a deep sleep. I only awoke as the plane was landing. My one-month stay was jam packed. I was working on the HIV/AIDS awareness/education. Together, with guidance from Ghanaian students, professors, and various community stakeholders, we developed different knowledge transfer strategies. We created role-plays and skits addressing stigma surrounding those who are HIV-positive. We developed activities using art for participants to express how they would feel if they had contracted HIV. We demonstrated the proper use of contraceptive methods. Our final knowledge transfer strategy was an HIV/AIDS

Youth Action Forum, which was attended by almost 400 youth from the community. This forum featured presentations by Ghanaian students on basic information about HIV/AIDS, a testimonial from a community member living with HIV, expressive dance, interactive games, and a panel discussion with different HIV/AIDS resource people from the community. Questions were welcomed at any point during the forum, and discussion was encouraged.

The most successful part of the forum was how it illustrated the community's capacity to work together to protect itself from HIV/AIDS. The panelists learned about their community's capacity, and realized how many young people were actually interested in the subject. At this forum, they decided to fund training for peer educators.

Looking back, the time I spent in Ghana was transformational. Not only did I learn more there than I have in my entire academic history, I learned a different approach to development. I learned that I mustn't assume that "our way is the best way". In Ghana I saw poverty, more extreme than I had ever witnessed before. Although saddened by this, I also learned that Ghanaians are amongst the happiest people in the world. Coming from a minority country where suicide and depression rates were sky high, but seemingly everyone's basic needs were being met, this baffled me. What is it that Ghana was doing, that we were not? What I learned from the Ghanaian way of life was to take it easy, to laugh, to enjoy time spent with friends and family, and to make time to build a strong and healthy community. The people I met in Ghana taught me that what we need in the world is balance and understanding to move towards a sustainable future. We need to tone it down a notch, so that the rest of the world's basic needs can be met. I learned that in order for development to make a positive difference, it needs to be redefined to ensure it empowers community, stemming from the participation of all community members.

For more information about the project visit: <http://www.mala.ca/ghana/>.