

# Learning from our mistakes

A collection from Overseas Volunteer Staff



engineers without borders  
ingénieurs sans frontières  
Canada

National Conference 2009



# ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS

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## Foreword

Two core values that EWB embodies are: critical thinking and analysis (“asking the tough questions”), and being a learning organization constantly trying to improve. So it’s easy to understand why so many chapter members yearn to hear of the challenges faced overseas or of some of the mistakes EWB has made along the way in pursuit of serving Dorothy.

Through this thinking, this booklet was created. It is a collaboration of efforts between all Overseas Volunteer Staff (OVS) in an attempt to bring the chapters closer to overseas work. The first aim of this booklet is to highlight a **few** of the challenges and mistakes OVS have made, and how EWB has grown and improved because of these experiences. The second aim is to generate a dialogue about overseas work in general, its challenges, and how EWB

evolves after making mistakes.

One difficulty that comes when reporting failures is that the goals of our overseas programs are for the most part very intangible and difficult to measure. This makes both successes and failures hard to be transparent about. This booklet is a start towards being more transparent about the work we do, the mistakes we’ve made, and the learning that’s occurred as a result.

Another difficulty is that the work that OVS do is complex. Development is quite complex already, and because we are often at different levels – from individual field level (Dorothy), to organizational and institutional levels, to international systemic levels – giving the entire picture in a short booklet such as this is impossible.

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Because of these challenges, we've added the email addresses of each OVS after their story: this will allow you to communicate directly with us to get the full story, and challenge us in our thinking of how to improve. You are deeply encouraged to probe deeper and communicate directly with the OVS! A dialogue of this nature will only strengthen EWB by allowing more people to reflect upon our work.

Lastly, please give feedback on the entire booklet itself. What do

you think of the initiative? What would you like to hear more of? Should it be continued next year and, if so, how could it be improved? Share any thoughts with OVS at the conference or with National Office staff, or email me directly. This is a chance for all of us critically analyze and understand our overseas work, and then work towards improving EWB.

**Nick Jimenez**

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## En influençant les bailleurs de fonds

### Personnel outremer

Dan Olsen (gauche)

Nick Jimenez (centre-gauche)

Jen Hiscock (centre-droite)

Louis Dorval (droite)

Mary Roach (photographe)

**Pays** Ghana

**Équipe** Bonne

**sectorielle** Gouvernance

**Partenaire** Texte d'équipe

Cette histoire ne raconte pas une erreur qui a été commise par un seul individu, mais par une équipe. Ce genre d'erreur risque d'être de plus en plus fréquent et devrait donc être étudié.

Suite à nos activités au cours de l'été et de l'automne, certains bailleurs de fonds (notamment la Banque Mondiale, l'Unicef et l'ACDI) nous ont invité à passer dans la capitale Accra pour discuter des réalités terrain que nous avons observées à travers



notre travail et pour que nous leur fassions des recommandations sur les meilleurs moyens d'atteindre certains de leurs objectifs, notamment:

- Renforcer les capacités des unités décentralisées de gouvernement
- Combattre la corruption
- Quel rôle les bailleurs de fonds doivent jouer dans les processus de négociation
- Quel rôle le gouvernement régional devrait jouer
- Comment mesurer la performance des districts

- Comment intégrer la gouvernance traditionnelle

Ceci est une opportunité incroyable pour ISF pour 2 raisons. La première est que comme nous sommes prêts de nos partenaires (les unités de gouvernement décentralisées) et comprenons leurs réalités quotidiennes, nous avons la chance d'ajouter à leur voix auprès des instances qui ont beaucoup de pouvoir dans la région (les bailleurs de fonds). Ensuite, les bailleurs de fonds ont les moyens de nous aider à faciliter le changement que nous essayons de faciliter au sein des unités de gouvernement décentralisées : une augmentation de gestion de l'information et de la planification.

En préparation pour ces rencontres, nous avons donc consulté nos partenaires et leur avons demandé ce qu'ils voudraient que nous disions aux bailleurs. Nous avons aussi

révisé notre stratégie afin de pouvoir l'expliquer le plus clairement possible, et de pouvoir formuler des recommandations précises pour les bailleurs. Finalement, nous avons préparé des présentations pour chacun des bailleurs de façon à répondre le plus spécifiquement possible aux questions que chacun nous a posé, et de leur faire des suggestions en lignes avec leurs réalités et objectifs spécifiques.

De façon générale nos recommandations suggéraient :

- De revoir la nature de leur relation avec les différents paliers de gouvernement afin de créer des relations de confiance, une imputabilité mutuelle et de laisser leur partenaires faire des erreurs desquels ils peuvent apprendre.
- De revoir le rôle du gouvernement régional comme un pallier clé dans le processus de

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décentralisation et un allier important pour créer et implanter une stratégie de développement dans le nord du Ghana.

- De dissocier les objectifs de 'renforcement de capacité' et de 'réduction de la pauvreté à court terme' parce que ces objectifs entrent souvent en compétition au profit des objectifs de réduction de la pauvreté à court terme.

Là où nous avons fait notre erreur, c'est justement au niveau de nos recommandations. Ce que nous avons appris, c'est qu'il est possible de catégoriser des recommandations en au moins 2 catégories: des suggestions de solutions pour des problèmes déjà compris, et des suggestions de solutions pour des problèmes qui sont encore inconnus (ou non perçus comme prioritaires).

Nous avons pris pour acquis que les bailleurs de fonds étaient déjà sensibilisés aux mêmes défis que nous et que nous

pourrions les engagés dans des discussions sur des solutions innovatrices à ces défis. Ce que nous nous sommes rendus compte, c'est que dans la plupart des cas, nous n'avions pas la même vision de la réalité et des problèmes prioritaires.

Ceci a rendus nos échanges moins efficaces que nous l'aurions souhaité et nous a rappelé une leçon importante sur l'importance de considérer les perspectives différentes de chacun des acteurs dans le contexte d'un projet de changement. Nous n'avions clairement pas passé assez de temps pour comprendre quelle était la position actuelle des bailleurs de fonds avant de nous demander où nous voulions les amener par le processus de nos discussions. Bien que cette démarche soit évidente quand nous travaillons avec nos partenaires africains du nord, elle nous échappe parfois lorsque nous travaillons avec les bailleurs, souvent occidentaux,



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dans la capitale Accra. Ce que nous ferons mieux la prochaine fois, c'est de poser un maximum de questions au début de la rencontre afin de pouvoir mieux comprendre la perspective de nos interlocuteurs, en plus d'avoir une plus grande liste de recommandations, toutes avec une explication exhaustive du problème et de la solution proposée. Ceci nous permettra d'avoir un échange avec un

maximum de flexibilité, tout en demeurant rigoureux et en représentant la perspective de nos partenaires avec un maximum de fidélité.

**Louis Dorval**

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## Hiring Local Staff

*A past mistake from previous work in the Philippines*

|                |  |
|----------------|--|
| <b>Staff</b>   | <b>Sarah Grant</b>   |
| <b>Country</b> | <b>Philippines</b>   |
| <b>Project</b> | <b>SCALA</b>   |
| <b>Partner</b> | <b>Departement of<br/>Social Welfare<br/>and Development</b> |



## The Story

Through-out my experiences overseas with EWB I have made plenty of mistakes and learnt a lot from them! This one in particular sticks out in my mind.

I was sent to the Philippines to help EWB phase responsibly out of the Scala project. Or rather have the project continue to be run successfully without our presence. This was a huge task but I was up for it!

### Working for me

The project was designed in a sustainable manner in the first place. Past volunteers had established the project as

something where EWB volunteers go to a community, remain there for 6 weeks and leave once a computer livelihood training centre is established. So at the community level the project was sustained.

### Working against me

At the national level we weren't set up for success. The program was run through a department of the national government that typically develops and pilots programs, the Social Technology Bureau. It was a great match while the program was being developed. But once EWB decided to phase ourselves out of

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the project the positioning of the Scala project at a national level became an issue.

## My ideas

My initial idea was to encourage the project to move to the national department that handles all ongoing projects, the Program Management Bureau. I was told this wasn't a good idea since most projects do not thrive under the management of this department. The reasons for this are complex and due largely to a too speedy government transition to decentralized government i.e. the national level has less power and resources.

So, back to the Social Technology Bureau, I brought up the idea of having the Scala Project a permanent part of someone's work. "We're too busy", was the response. So, stuck between a rock and a hard place I tried to figure out other solutions. The best I could come up with was that EWB pay for

the DSWD to hire a permanent project coordinator for the staff. This was agreed upon by all – EWB and the DSWD.

So with agreement from all sides, we set out to set the terms of reference and contract details for this staff. EWB ended up paying for the first 12 months of the salary with the understanding that if the position was proven successful the government would absorb the continuing costs of this staff position. This whole process took about 9 months (but I did do other work during this time!)

## Moving with the idea

I was very excited that we were going to have a staff that could run the project at a national level! We hired Riza Zuniga, a talented project manager with tons of experience in the NGO world. With strong communication and facilitation skills and a love for helping youth, I knew she would be great with the project!

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Riza's first day aligned with my first vacation in over a year. I figured it was no big deal. The government decided her first day and I wanted them to have complete ownership over her position. A week later I returned from vacation and met Riza. She was exactly as her resume predicted, energetic, smart and already quite settled with her new job. I was pretty excited to meet the very person that would make sure this project continued after I left the Philippines. Over the next few weeks I made sure that I passed on all of my knowledge and ideas on to Riza. She willingly accepted. As we worked closer and closer together she started following EWB rules but not the rules of the government – her employer! She insisted on writing a letter to Parker thanking him for her job. She didn't want to follow the government's protocols for travelling since they were too bureaucratic (they are quite cumbersome)! And most of all,

she didn't respect her senior staff member and jumped the hierarchy. It seems she was acting like an EWB volunteer! This resulted in a loss of trust. The negative events continued with animosity towards Riza resulting in Riza's continued disrespect for government protocols. With my placement coming to a close I was seeing my dreams crumble before me! The day before I left for Christmas holidays in Canada Riza informed me she was planning to quit the job. She felt bad for me but felt that she wasn't getting due respect from her colleagues.

### From devastation to lessons learned

I was of course, devastated to learn that Riza quit! Upon reflection it's no surprise. Even as I write this story does the decision to hire Riza seem too simple a solution.

### **Mistake: Add-on solutions don't work**

When trying to increase roles in

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an organization, it's best to work with what you have (existing structures and bureaus) and influence the people inside rather than bringing someone from the outside to perform a role.

- **Lesson learned** I would have been better off to try and work within one of the government departments and use this problem as an opportunity to address the challenge that all projects face when they go from a pilot project to a standard program in the government's portfolio –they mostly die out due to lack of national support. In my rush to phase out, taking on more work wasn't an option I considered.

## **Mistake: Money and capacity building doesn't mix**

Of course the government said yes to my proposal! It was essentially money for them to hire someone. This was a

blessing in a department where the staff are too few and the work too much. However, even though we paid for Riza's first few months salary the government never did take full ownership over her job. They gave her a poor orientation and slotted her into a lower role in the hierarchy than she deserved.

- **Lesson learned** As soon as I offered the money the ability for an open dialogue with the government was severely diminished. I was naïve enough to believe that the strong relationship I had with my government colleagues could allow us to overcome this. I was wrong. Dialogue was constrained. The government didn't have ownership over the position and I was limited in my ability to help due to my new role as financial supporter. **I didn't really trust that my partner would figure out a way to continue to project in my absence so**

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**I forced a solution on them.**

*To this date, the Scala project has been run by the national government, not in the way that I would have designed it but in a way that suits them. As far as we know, the Scala project is still thriving in the Philippines with many Computer Livelihood Training Centres still active.*

*As for me, I am now working in Ghana with the Ministry of*

*Food and Agriculture. I have a longer perspective on my work there which allows me to design and implement solutions that address deeper issues and have well aligned incentives.*

**Sarah Grant**

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**You can learn more about EWB's previous work in the Philippines and Sarah Grant's evaluation of the Scala project by visiting the following website:**

**<http://www.ewb.ca/en/whatwedo/overseas/projects/past/scala.html>**

### Wrong approach to hierarchy and upward feedback

|                  |                                 |
|------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Volunteer</b> | <b>Nick Jimenez</b>             |
| <b>Country</b>   | <b>Ghana</b>                    |
| <b>Sector</b>    | <b>Good</b>                     |
| <b>Team</b>      | <b>Governance</b>               |
| <b>Partner</b>   | <b>Saboba District Assembly</b> |



### The Story

I started my placement with the Saboba District Assembly in March 2008. The District Assembly is the local government body responsible for all development interventions in the Saboba district – approximately 100 000 people. At the beginning of my placement I worked hard to better understand the District Assembly (DA) and the challenges it faced.

After two months at the DA working with co-workers on a variety of tasks, my director decided, based on his wants and

my observations, the focus of my work. My director wanted me to focus my efforts on four areas:

1. Conduct a mid-way review of the development plan for the district
2. Strengthen the District Planning and Coordinating Unit
3. Computer training for staff
4. General assistance in office tasks.

Planning in Ghana is on a four year cycle. Two years before I arrived, a large development plan had been drawn up, defining the activities to be done

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for the next four years. Following that, another development plan would be made for the subsequent four years. The District Planning and Coordinating Unit is the committee set up to plan all development efforts in the district, and my director is the chairman of this committee.

Saboba however, was splitting into two smaller districts. Because of this, both 'new' districts would need new development plans. My thinking was that I would conduct an evaluation on the work the district had done to date and then, using the committee, draw up a new and improved development plan. The hope was that a DA that learns before planning could then improve planning and thus improve implementation and service delivery.

Working with my director's right hand man, my counterpart, I began the review by analyzing all

the reports in the last two years and comparing them with the development plan. In this, I would be able to assess how much of the plan had been completed, and draw other useful trends that could improve the next plan. After three weeks of intense work, reading over 10 reports, and writing a 40 page report, I had completed my literature review. I tried to make it as constructive as possible. However, my director wanted something very specific when he said "mid-way review", and what I embarked on for these three weeks was not it.

Knowing that reports can never compare to direct assessments in the field, I worked with my counterpart on putting together a proposal for a large evaluation throughout the district for the next two weeks. One hundred communities would be visited, a rapid assessment would be undertaken at each one, vital information would be recorded, and communities would get a



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chance to give feedback to the government. We conducted two pilot evaluations to get a sense of the type of approach we would take in the communities.

My director was out of the office for most of these six weeks. It is common for most development partners – NGOs, donors, regional and national level of government – to hold meetings. These meetings often take place out of the district, forcing directors to leave the office for days at a time. My director was also very busy with the logistics concerning the splitting of the district, and so throughout this time my contact with him was minimal. This gave me even more space to further diverge from the task my director had assigned me.

I planned a two day workshop for the entire District Planning and Coordinating Unit. On the first day, we would discuss how the committee could improve its functioning, and decide on a

plan for making the committee more functional. On the second day, we would discuss the literature review that I had prepared, as well as design the evaluation to be conducted by the DA.

A few weeks before the meeting, I planned each of these meetings, since my counterpart and I would be the facilitators. He assured me that all was in order, and a week before the meeting we distributed the final invitation and the literature review to all invitees.

Within a few days, my director called my counterpart, and many other members of the committee, and expressed his utter disapproval of the document. After hearing this from my counterpart, I immediately called my director to try and cool the situation. He was furious on the phone, and repeatedly said “this is not what we want!” He argued most of my recommendations, and said that

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we would discuss it on the day of the meeting.

At the meeting, my director took complete control of the meeting leaving my counterpart and me as puppets recording notes and following directions. He removed a file from a previous EWB volunteer's work, and showed the minutes from a similar meeting previously held. Since there were a few overlap activities, he cut the meeting in half, eliminating the crucial components of our meeting. The meeting we had planned was a complete disaster.

To compound a horrible mess of a meeting, my director officially stated that the literature review be completely disregarded, and notified that the proposed evaluation would not be undertaken at all. With this announcement, the second day of workshop was completely useless, and I cancelled it. With the previous weeks of hard work completely lost, as well as my

plan for the next three months, I was a shattered mess.

### The Aftermath

The literature review was a waste because none of its findings or suggestions would be considered. The evaluation proposal was also for nothing, because it was denied. Just four months into my placement, this put me back to the drawing board in deciding what to work on.

I also burnt the most important bridge of trust with my partner organization. Because of the hierarchical system in Ghana, anything that happens in the DA needs to be inline with the thoughts of the director. Working without the trust of the director is synonymous with not working at all with the consent of the DA.

Somewhat lucky for me, my director was assigned to the 'new' district; so I was no longer working directly under him. A positive spinoff of the

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monumental failure was that most of the other members who read the document agreed with many of the suggestions, and it seemed to build trust with almost everyone except for my director.

## Key Mistakes

### Breach of communication

Though my director was out of the office for much of the time leading up to the meeting, I failed to communicate with him often enough to ensure that I was working on what he wanted. Had I continued to update my director while I was working, I could have re-aligned myself with the common objective and avoided the problem. In addition, I would have generated some ownership on his part over my work, and thus would no longer be working as a separate entity to the DA. At one point my director commented to one of my close co-workers: “he’s like an external auditor!”

Larger than that was the

elementary mistake in distributing a critical report about the DA to members **before** allowing my director to read it. Though I was pressed for time, I should have made all efforts to get his review of it before distribution.

### Early judgments

I wrote that document early in my placement before I had spent enough time learning about the District Assembly. Some of my suggestions were hasty, and justly refuted by my director. My recommendations may have been great if officers could freely make plans or use government money. But what I failed to see is that there are national guidelines for how to prepare a development plan, as well as for how to use the money from central government. The truth of the matter is that constructive documents often strike nerves because they fail to take into account the environment in which officers work. Without understanding the context, most

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suggestions one can conjure are not appropriate. A few of my criticisms committed this sin.

### **Disregard for hierarchy**

If distributing the report before allowing my director to review it wasn't quite enough, my approach to the meeting definitely was. The director is the chairman of that committee, meaning he is responsible for facilitating the meeting. Only if the chairman delegates the responsibility of facilitation over to someone else, can another person take control of the meeting. Put bluntly, planning the meeting in isolation from my director, and then trying to facilitate it was completely the wrong approach to holding a meeting.

### **Changing gears**

#### **My approach**

Communication is now at the top of my list. All ideas I have I bounce off of my new director, and I regularly update him on the work that I am doing. It

allows me to get the feedback of my director, ensure that our objectives are always aligned – sharing ownership. I have also been greatly humbled by this experience. I realize that outside criticisms are easy to make, and often misplaced. Most systems that are in place, are there for a reason. In hopes to know that reason, I always try to engage in discussions with my co-workers, as well as read background policy guiding DA operations. The strength of my position in the DA, is to work within the system with my counterparts to address those issues that prevent positive change. These issues are the very reason why more often than not, critical outside audits and evaluations are never put into practice.

Resistance is important! From my experience with my counterpart I have learned that constructive criticism and dissent is crucial. We agreed on most issues, and that is one reason why we were unable to

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see the failure coming. Now I seek out individuals I know will disagree with my work, to get good feedback on it. That healthy resistance strengthens my work and keeps me sharp. Lastly, I've learned how to work within the hierarchical system. In a future meeting with a committee, I not only planned it with the chairman, but he retained control throughout the meeting, making me solely the facilitator.

## **My area of work**

Apart from the obvious, my work was re-aligned to what my partner wants. I had a discussion with my director, and found out exactly what he was looking for and what I could do. Engaging him in that discussion was much more productive than my previous approach. Also at this point in my placement, our team was creating our strategy. We got feedback from our partners, and I also made a presentation to my new director to get feedback on the work I was

intending to do. Essentially, the work I am doing now is drawn from our partners.

Ironically however, most of the work I had done in those six weeks leading up to the meeting was not lost. My placement has come full circle, and I am now undertaking an evaluation of a similar approach and larger scale than the one I had previously put forth. The planning I had done earlier was used as a template for this new evaluation. The difference this time is that everybody is on board, and it is the initiative of the director that put it all in motion!

**Nick Jimenez**

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## Simple, linear, small-group thinking will no longer cut it

**Volunteer**     **Graham Lettner**

**Country**        **Malawi**

**Sector**          **Agriculture**

**Team**            **Value Chains**

**Partner**        **IITA**



### The Story

I began my placement at the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) in March 2008. In early April, I was paired with a small-scale rural entrepreneur, Mafayo Lungu, who had been set up by IITA to process cassava flour. My mandate from EWB and IITA was to help Mafayo become a successful rural cassava processor, and to learn about rural entrepreneurship in order to assist other entrepreneurs in other projects in the future.

Up until mid-May I worked alone with Mafayo, trying to

understand what processing cassava was all about, making a few small sales of flour, buying a bit of cassava from local farmers. In mid-May, Duncan McNicholl, a JF from UBC, was placed with IITA and joined Mafayo and I to help with the project.

Together we got down to business. We helped Mafayo analyze his processing problems and make changes to improve his production. We taught him business skills, such as how to calculate revenue, expenses, and profit, and he put these skills to use making a number of larger sales. We helped him present his

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business to a group of village headmen, we crunched the numbers to find his break-even sales volume and price, and we joined him for a couple sales trips to Lilongwe (the capital city of Malawi).

But by mid-June we discovered one major hang-up: there were no longer farmers with fresh cassava to sell to Mafayo's factory. The factory now sat idle, and with the factory idle it became much harder to teach Mafayo new skills since he had no opportunity to put them into practice.

Duncan and I set about trying to find a solution to all of this. Deciding that the crux of the issue was in the lack of regular cassava supply, we set out to try to find a farmer with a big field of cassava ready for sale. After two long weeks of bicycle trips crisscrossing the countryside, Duncan and Mafayo found success. They found a husband and wife with almost a hectare of

mature cassava, enough cassava to operate the factory continuously for two months. One problem remained, however: Mafayo didn't have the money to purchase such a big field.

After such a long search, and after the discovery of such a big field, finances seemed the least of our worries. Duncan and I decided to loan Mafayo the money to buy the field, confident (from our number crunching) that his sale of the flour he produced would be more than enough to pay us back. We rode a minibus to the nearest town that had an ATM, withdrew the maximum daily amount, and loaned Mafayo MK100,000 (\$CND 750) to buy the field.

For the next two months, things went just as we expected: the factory processed every week and Mafayo was receptive to learning and practicing new skills. This lasted until the end of August, when Duncan returned

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home. But by then, new problems had started to show. Mafayo hadn't found a profitable external market, so he had instead decided to store the flour at the factory and sell it to the community in December when food is short. With no new sales to bring in money, he couldn't afford to pay the staff that he had hired to process the cassava. This meant another smaller loan from me to allow him to pay his employees. With the purchased field completely harvested and processed, the factory was again idle, the employees had no more work and had to be let go, and Mafayo was without ways to practice the new business skills we had taught him.

We had problems all over again.

### Key mistakes made

#### **When problem-solving, we failed to search for alternatives**

This failure to look for alternatives occurred at two major levels. First, after deciding

that fresh cassava supply was the problem that needed solving, we quickly jumped to the idea of finding a large field and financing the purchase of it. In fact, there were dozens of alternatives to this course of action. The benefit of looking for these alternatives would have been twofold: to perhaps find a better course of action, and to more thoroughly consider any course of action that we did choose, even if it turned out to be what we first proposed. Second, we didn't look for alternatives to our problem definition. We quickly jumped to the problem of "not enough fresh cassava supply" without taking time to explore alternatives. We may have instead arrived at different problems such as "market signals aren't clear to farmers to grow more cassava" or, "Mafayo is unconnected to financial services".

**As soon as we settled on a problem definition, we used**



### **additional data to justify our position, not to better understand the situation**

It is clear in retrospect that once we had decided that the problem was both a lack of fresh cassava and the money to purchase it, our minds moved quickly to justifying that this was so. The reasons we gave were many: Mafayo won't learn if the factory doesn't run; he shouldn't sit idle until local cassava is matured; he needs this experience for later when farmers do have cassava to sell, and others. The type of self-justifying tunnel vision leads to an information bias from which it is difficult to escape even when a project begins to go wrong.

### **Throughout our work during this time with Mafayo, we communicated very little to IITA colleagues or to other OVS**

The lack of interaction with others confined our thinking to just ourselves. A huge benefit in freely sharing and discussing ideas is that every person has a different perspective and

different experience. Thus, consideration by a wide group has the inherent benefit of seeing a situation from multiple perspectives which helps to expose blind spots, gaps in understanding, and new possibilities.

### **Lessons learned**

#### **Better thinking is needed**

It's important not to regard thinking as intelligence. What I'm saying is not, "we need to pick smarter OVS and JFs," but that we need to think in better ways. What is needed is thinking that values and takes time to propose alternatives. This should happen in all stages of intervention design: explaining the current situation, perceiving a problem, designing a solution, and forecasting consequences. Exploration around each of these steps is much better than quickly thinking the way to a particular solution, then finding the data to justify it. All proposed solutions should

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undergo rigorous analysis in terms of its positives, negatives, and other interesting points raised. As OVS and JFs, we need to perceive more possibilities, and assess those possibilities more thoroughly, especially if the solution seems unattractive or against our standard way of doing things.

### **EWB must continue to support and encourage good thinking**

What this takes will be an ongoing effort to create a culture that promotes good thinking. Part of this culture is friendship. The overseas program requires strong, critical friendships between OVS, and time and effort are needed to create these friendships: they don't materialize overnight. EWB overseas culture also needs to continue to open itself up to new perspectives and new alternatives, and one of the best ways of doing this is by having many different people see and

discuss what we are doing. What we don't want is to insulate ourselves from others' questions and perspectives, which is what Duncan and I did. This means that we'll need to work hard to communicate the things that we do, as well as the successes and failures we encounter in our work. It also means that we'll need to nurture and support our culture which is a task for OVS, JFs, and all EWB members. Culture is complex and ambiguous and thus needs the new ideas, questions, input and feedback, from many different sources.

### **An appreciation for the complexity of it all**

Duncan and I learned that Mafayo's factory, though seemingly small and straightforward, is part of a much larger complex system of community dynamics, financial norms, interpersonal relationships, and Malawian society. Without appreciating it

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as such, we came up with a pretty blunt and inadequate solution to a complex problem. Likewise, EWB culture is a complex system of people, values, ideas, relationships and much more. If we can appreciate it as such, we are incredibly further along to creating a culture that supports overseas

work and connects to EWB members in Canada.

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## Un engagement à tous les niveaux pour une appropriation totale

**Volontaire** Jean-François Soublière  
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**Équipe sectorielle** Eau, hygiène et assainissement  
**Partenaire** WaterAid



### L'histoire

Un des principaux objectifs des placements outremer d'Ingénieurs sans frontières est de réussir à créer des changements positifs auprès de nos partenaires. Pour y arriver, chaque volontaire passe habituellement à travers une phase de diagnostic, de planification, puis de mise en œuvre et de rétroaction. Après avoir passé près de deux mois auprès de mon partenaire local, j'avais déjà développé une idée des contributions que j'aurais aimé apporter à mon organisme partenaire, mais je devais

d'abord m'assurer que ces idées étaient adéquates et que mes collègues se les approprieraient.

J'ai donc voulu engager mes collègues dans un processus de réflexion à la fois sur leur manière de travailler de façon individuelle, ainsi que sur leur efficacité en tant qu'organisation entière. Pour y arriver, je pensais faire participer l'ensemble du personnel dans l'élaboration d'un diagnostic organisationnel. À travers cette analyse du fonctionnement de l'organisation, j'espérais d'abord découvrir de nouvelles opportunités de contribution et

vérifier mes premières analyses, puis j'espérais aussi créer un consensus par rapport à la situation actuelle. Si chacun s'entendait pour juger la situation insatisfaisante, l'engagement de chacun serait plus facile à obtenir pour changer le statu quo.

Depuis quelques temps, Ingénieurs sans frontières a développé une grille d'analyse organisationnelle pour aider ses volontaires dans cet exercice, et j'étais pressé de m'en servir. J'ai donc rassemblé l'ensemble du personnel pour leur présenter mon initiative, mais tous n'étaient pas disponibles : environ deux ou trois membres du personnel étaient en mission et le Coordonateur de l'organisation était toujours au bureau central dans une autre ville. Je leur ai alors présenté la grille d'analyse en leur demandant s'ils étaient prêts à s'investir dans l'activité.

Au début, l'exercice leur a

semblé fastidieux. Mais chacun s'est engagé à compléter l'exercice pour d'abord m'aider à mieux cibler les contributions que je pourrais apporter pendant la prochaine année, puis pour réfléchir sur les autres aspects, qui peuvent être en dehors de mon cercle d'influence, mais qui pourraient être améliorés. Quelques heures à peine après avoir présenté l'activité, je recevais déjà les résultats de plusieurs membres du personnel avec des commentaires très positifs sur la pertinence de l'exercice. Il ne me restait plus qu'à présenter la grille d'analyse aux deux autres membres du personnel et au Coordonateur.

Quand j'ai pu enfin rencontrer le Coordonateur, il était enthousiaste par rapport aux changements que l'activité pourrait engendrer. Mais, en tant que premier responsable de l'organisation, le Coordonateur aurait été directement impliqué dans ces changements, et il

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aurait préféré être avisé avant de démarrer l'activité. J'accusais déjà ma première erreur, mais j'étais heureux de trouver avec lui un terrain d'entente sur l'utilité de l'exercice.

Avant de partir, je lui ai fait part d'une de mes inquiétudes : quelques membres du personnel m'ont mentionné en me remettant leurs résultats qu'ils auraient sûrement répondu différemment si l'exercice n'avait pas été anonyme. Craignant que la présence du Coordonateur nuise aux échanges lors de la restitution des résultats à tout le personnel, je lui ai demandé s'il lui était possible de ne pas venir. À ce moment, je n'avais pas eu l'impression d'avoir insisté et sa réponse cordiale me rassurait. Le Coordonateur avait accepté de ne pas venir et comprenait mon inquiétude.

Par contre, en voulant organiser l'atelier de restitution des résultats, je me suis heurté à un mur. Le personnel entier refusait

de poursuivre sans la présence du Coordonateur. Quant à lui, le Coordonateur refusait maintenant lui aussi de participer à la restitution. Pour lui, rien n'avait changé depuis notre dernière conversation et, selon ce raisonnement, sa présence nuirait toujours aux échanges, tel que je l'avais affirmé lors de notre rencontre. Le Coordonateur ne reviendrait pas sur la décision de ne pas participer.

C'est seulement suite à ce dernier échange avec le Coordonateur que j'ai réalisé l'ampleur de ma bêtise. J'avais été impatient d'utiliser mon outil et j'avais grillé plusieurs feux rouges. Dans mon élan, j'ai négligé l'engagement de la direction et j'ai bifurqué la hiérarchie. Encore aujourd'hui, je suis dans la même impasse et je n'ai jamais pu restituer les résultats du diagnostic organisationnel. Toutes mes activités par rapport à ce projet n'ont eu aucune retombées.

### Erreurs commises et leçons apprises

Dans la planification de mes activités, j'étais davantage préoccupé par l'outil que j'allais utiliser que par la mise en œuvre des changements. J'espérais déclencher un processus de réflexion critique auprès de mon partenaire et je me voyais

prendre un rôle d'appui assez réduit une fois que mes collègues se seraient engagés dans certains changements. J'ai donc fournis davantage d'efforts pour présenter un outil d'analyse et de réflexion adapté à mes collègues, plutôt que de m'assurer que les conditions soient favorables pour que le

### Planification et évaluation de mon intervention

|                  | Intrants  | Activités  | Extrants   | Retombées   |
|------------------|---|--|--|---|
| Résultats prévus | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>15 jours de mon temps de travail</li> <li>5 heures du temps de travail de mes collègues</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mise en contexte de l'outil de diagnostic</li> <li>Présentation de l'outil à l'équipe</li> <li>Compilation et analyse des résultats</li> <li>Restitution des résultats et rédaction d'un plan d'action</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outil de diagnostic adapté à l'équipe</li> <li>Outil présenté et compris par l'équipe</li> <li>Résultats compilés et analysés</li> <li>Diagnostic établi et plan d'action rédigé</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Création d'un consensus par rapport à la situation actuelle</li> <li>Équipe engagée à améliorer les aspects insatisfaisants</li> </ul> |
| Résultats réels  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>10 jours de mon temps de travail</li> <li>3 heures du temps de travail de mes collègues</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mise en contexte de l'outil de diagnostic</li> <li>Présentation de l'outil à l'équipe</li> <li>Compilation et analyse des résultats</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Outil de diagnostic adapté à l'équipe</li> <li>Outil présenté et compris par l'équipe</li> <li>Résultats compilés et analysés</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Processus arrêté avant d'avoir pu discuter des résultats du diagnostic</li> <li>Perte de confiance auprès de la direction</li> </ul>   |

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changement puisse se produire. J'ai démarré les activités avant de m'assurer l'engagement de la direction.

En poursuivant cette même erreur, j'ai demandé au Coordonnateur de ne pas venir lors de la présentation des résultats du diagnostic sans avoir d'abord consulté mes collègues. J'ai présumé que son absence serait préférable pour faciliter échanges, mais sans considérer que son engagement dans le processus serait crucial ultérieurement si l'exercice mettait en évidence des changements importants au sein de l'organisation. En fait, en décidant d'exclure le Coordonnateur, j'agrandissais le fossé déjà existant entre la hiérarchie et les employés. Et ce n'était pas le message que mes collègues souhaitaient envoyer à leur Coordonnateur, qui aurait pu bloquer toutes les initiatives ayant découlé des échanges par rapport aux résultats du diagnostic. Plutôt, j'aurais dû

renforcer la culture d'équipe et d'inclusion en jouant le rôle d'un facilitateur externe qui aurait pu modérer les débats et s'assurer que chacun puisse s'exprimer librement.

Aujourd'hui, avant d'entamer mes activités, j'essaie d'être le plus ouvert possible par rapport à mes objectifs et d'obtenir l'avis de mes collègues sur la meilleure manière de procéder pour les engager entièrement dans mes activités. Je réfléchis davantage à la façon dont les résultats de mes activités seront repris et poursuivis dans le futur par mes collègues. Sans un engagement de mes collègues à tous les niveaux de la hiérarchie, mes collègues ne peuvent pas s'approprier le résultat de mes activités.

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