

My thoughts on development as I leave Mali (1991)

As I prepare to leave Mali, I am both encouraged and discouraged by the things I have seen as a witness and participant in the struggle for self-reliance and self-development.

I am discouraged when I see people waiting for a hand-out instead of taking charge to improve their own lives through the wise application of resources found in their own village.

I am discouraged when I see women asking for water pumps to draw water 10 meters when people in another village in the same region are pulling water from 50 meters by hand without complaint to water their gardens.

I am discouraged when a group of our project beneficiaries are entrusted with project funds to purchase mud bricks to build a fence around their garden and instead use part of the funds to pay themselves for their manual labor in building the fence.

I am discouraged when I see development workers who are more interested in per diems than working to improve the lives of people: I know of government workers who refused to attend an important training program because the organizers offered no per diem, even though the training was held in the city where they lived and scheduled during regular work hours.

I am discouraged when I see development agencies that demand an amount from the outside donor that is totally inconsistent with their stated objectives of making the target group independent of outside support and spreading project innovations to other people in the area.

True development á la base cannot take place as long as the kind of incidents cited above persist, and the sad truth is that I see all too many examples of them.

The fundamental truth that I have learned in my five years in Mali is that true development can never be imposed from the outside — development comes from within. Only Africans can organize themselves and their resources in such a way to rise out of the appalling poverty and living conditions. We outsiders can serve as catalysts to stimulate the process of communication, experimentation and exchange of ideas. But it is up to you, the Africans, to apply your knowledge, experience and resources to increase food production, protect the environment and improve standards of literacy and health.

Fortunately, I also see these kind of things happening which remind me how much potential exists in Africa when people find the motivation to make things happen.

I'm encouraged when I see that one of our gardening projects has come up with an effective, new pesticide using the leaves of two local trees and wood ashes that will limit insect damage to their garden.

I'm encouraged when I see people dig through 25 meters of solid rock in order to build a well to help them start gardening.

I'm encouraged when Lutheran World Relief (LWR) agrees to pay for one garden well and the villagers build 30 more wells with their own resources.

I'm encouraged when I see our partners develop new ideas, testing them and then spreading the results via ECHANGE, technical exchanges and informal visits.

I'm encouraged when I see our partners not asking LWR to cover all the costs of the project inputs but instead starting to ask the target populations to pay their share, and increasing that share as the project activities take off and become more profitable.

More than anything, I'm encouraged when I see our partners working with our target populations to involve them to the greatest extent possible in every aspect of project management. The importance of involving the population completely in project management is becoming more and more accepted. This trend is most encouraging to LWR, because it has long been the key to our work in West Africa and other places around the world.

One of the biggest problems I've seen in other NGOs' projects is that too many of them make no attempt to imitate the real world. Instead, they create a false world where project inputs are given for free and the training and ideas are spread not by local people but outsiders who will only be around for as long as the project is funded from the outside. These projects make no attempt to exploit the human and materials resources already available in the area. The failure to build on this local base is probably the greatest tragedy in development and the reason why most projects fail.

My greatest encouragement is to see our partners slowly, but surely, starting to move away from the old-style, paternalistic approach to development to a more sustainable, people-centered way of doing things. Our partners are starting to ask more of the people we are trying to help -organizationally, intellectually and financially. This approach is the only road to true development.

During my first few years in Mali I grew tired of hearing people continually complain about their "manque de moyens" (lack of means) while I saw enormous means all around that were often unexploited. We were talking about two different kinds of means. They were talking about financial ones; I was talking about non-financial ones, such as human and natural resources.

It's true that Africa does not have the natural resources of Europe or North America. But Africa does have enormous human resources that are not being fully exploited. If Africa, by the kind of people-centered development described above, can learn to more fully exploit its human resources to better use its natural resources, there is no limit to the progress that can be made.

To have the West African partners of LWR fully engaged in that struggle is the most encouraging legacy that I can leave behind.