

# FROM THE AFRICA FILE: THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF SUCCESS

*In early March, we sent an appeal via AFSANet asking members with experience at African posts to share brief vignettes about ways the U.S. has helped foster positive change, or could do so. We thank all Foreign Service personnel who shared their observations and experiences. In fact, we received so many thoughtful responses that we will run more next month.*

— Susan B. Maitra, Senior Editor

## **Conflict Resolution and Development Go Hand in Hand**

Under the bright African sky on a hot summer afternoon, over 2,000 women, men and children gathered around the local meeting place. Imagine a sea of colors: people dressed in their brightest batik, curious children in ragtag outfits, government officials decked out in suits, military men in fatigues and traditional leaders draped in ceremonial cloth. Faces were lit with happiness, sadness, remembrance and forgiveness as mothers lamented lost sons and fathers bemoaned lost solidarity. People from different families, villages and ethnic groups had come together for the first time in over 20 years to talk about peace: to voice their grievances and start to repair the damage inflicted by civil war. The people met for two days, both to share in cultural events (theater, dance and sport) and to hold an inclusive dialogue.

I am part of the team in USAID's Senegal mission that sponsors local and international NGOs to organize community peace-building activities such as the ceremony described above, using traditional means to break pacts of revenge and end the circle of violence in the Casamance region of southern Senegal. In response to one of the longest-lasting conflicts in Africa, a low-level war for succession that has affected over one million people, we designed a special program that could meet development needs in such an unstable environment.

The program rationale posits that if the people responsible for and affected by the conflict have the opportunity to improve their economic well-being, political empowerment in development issues and social cohesiveness, then much of the discontent that indirectly fuels the fighting would be decreased, direct channels for reconciliation would be increased, and peace will ensue. Our approach has been to remain neutral on a political level, facilitate dialogue between the belligerent parties, implement activities without formal peace accords, directly fund reconciliation activities, and assist and empower the people harmed by the fighting — not always by focusing on the conflict.

For example, without spotlighting the rebellion, our NGO partners have assisted communities to identify their strengths/weaknesses and prioritize problems. Solutions

are co-funded, complementing community resources. Assistance mechanisms are flexible and quickly implemented, with an eye to local capacity-building and sustainability. Solutions have included canoe transport for isolated islands, health huts and school

classrooms, community grocery shops, and labor-saving devices such as grain mills.

Economic development via the private sector has also been an effective tool. Our NGO partners took local natural resources (cashew nuts, sesame seeds) and taught private entrepreneurs to produce and/or process them, to manage their businesses, and then created marketing channels to sell production. The result: new jobs and income that will continue after development funding ends. Less poverty equals less discontent.

Peace in the Casamance is, unfortunately, not yet a signed deal, but momentum at many levels has increased. The government and rebel forces have made noticeable progress in the last year via formal meetings and announcements on key issues. Refugees and internally displaced people have started to voluntarily return.

## MEMBERS SHARE STORIES OF PROGRESS FROM AROUND THE CONTINENT.

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The U.S. has been the only outside actor in the Casamance since 2000, and there is satisfaction now, in 2004, in seeing other members of the international community follow suit. We believe that U.S. development activities in the Casamance have greatly contributed to increased stability and reconciliation.

Perhaps if these types of activities were implemented *before* a conflict erupts, much suffering and instability could be avoided altogether.

*Kathryn Lane*  
*Casamance Coordinator*  
*USAID Mission/Senegal*

### **There's No Leapfrogging the Community Level**

During the mid-1990s, after the closure of our USAID mission, I worked as the democracy and human rights coordinator as well as special self-help coordinator at Embassy Banjul in The Gambia. With the ambassador's approval, I made decisions on funding and dispensed taxpayer money to projects. Many good projects were launched, but at the same time projects were canceled that were not on track.

Personally, I had had enough of money being thrown at unsustainable, unrealistic projects. I had witnessed the closure of our local USAID mission, which quite literally disappeared without a trace. I was at once saddened and angered, not by the closure itself, but rather the fact that it could be closed down and practically nothing of the massive amounts of time and effort expended on development remained manifest in the country.

I am a fan of the self-help program. I truly believe that well-directed small investments at the community level are the key to sustainable development, and that the community level must not be leapfrogged for larger, more unwieldy schemes.

I have also come to realize that, without a doubt, women are the key to project success. I watched as the women and girls of the villages headed out to the fields every morning and returned from their toils with the setting sun, while many of the men seemed to lounge around under the shade of the baobab trees sipping tea and smoking cigarettes. This led me to review several years worth of self-help files, and conduct follow-up visits to numerous

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project sites. Almost without fail, those projects run by women and for women were the successes.

The following guidelines that I employed will, I am confident, ring true elsewhere:

- The idea for a project must be completely indigenous. Offer advice and guidance, but the initial impetus and the subsequent management must be local.
- The smaller and simpler the project, the greater the likelihood of success and, more important, sustainability.
- Focusing on community-oriented women's groups and local women's organizations will ensure that projects will benefit more than a handful of individuals.
- While one-time investments on things like school buildings, perimeter fences, and equipment are quick and easy, money-making ventures are better for the community in the long run. Chicken farms, wells for community gardens, arts and crafts centers are all viable sustainable projects.
- Be sure to include an educational element (i.e., money raised will go into building new schools, buying school supplies, etc.).

*Michael Kelly*

### **Working for Justice**

One would never guess that South Africa's "Big Five" game animals are playing a role in an ambitious new project to achieve a more effective and accessible justice system. The lion, elephant, rhino, leopard and buffalo inspired a unique training program to help thousands of Department of Justice employees drive the restructuring of court support services in South Africa.

"Re Aga Boswa," which means "we are rebuilding" in the Sotho language, is a comprehensive effort to transform court services, redefining the court environment as the nucleus of service delivery. It is a partnership of South Africa's Department of Justice and the local NGO, Business Against Crime, with USAID.

KwaZulu-Natal's court system, where the new court services support model has been piloted, has been fundamentally transformed — not just by structural adaptations to service delivery, but by recognizing Department of Justice staff at every level as the fuel behind a new engine. To prepare for the changes, Re Aga Boswa designed the "Habits Training Program." It focuses on developing a partnership between multiple role players. A story called

“Changing Landscapes” tells the tale of South Africa’s “Big Five” game animals and the roles they play during the course of a migration to new pastures. The animals are used in the training programs, notably in a board game that tests the negotiation skills of players, their patience and their own roles in the workplace.

Seventy-five members of the Department of Justice have been trained as facilitators and multipliers of the Habits Training Program. Not only have court workers at every level discovered skills that may have forever gone untapped, but the Department of Justice learned the power residing within its own people. “Habits Change” seminars have boosted morale and reduced worker absenteeism. The project marks the first time hundreds of employees received on-the-job training, and has led to a commitment by the justice minister to allocate each employee an hour every week for training purposes.

The New Court Support Services Model is expanding to service three additional provinces. Dr. Biki Minyuku, Re Aga Boswa’s director and program director at Business Against Crime, says: “The best investment we have made is in the minds of people. People are our most strategic resource.”

*Reverie Zurba  
Information Officer  
USAID, Pretoria*

## **Two Success Stories from Nigeria**

### **1. Midwives No Longer Flee Calabar Mothers**

Midwives in Nigeria’s Cross River state used to scamper away from women in the midst of painful childbirth if the mothers were suspected of living with HIV. In at least one major Calabar hospital, though, midwives trained in a U.S.-funded infection prevention program over the last four years now assist with all deliveries, regardless of HIV status.

With this newfound focus on treating all patients regardless of any HIV stigma, doctors at the University of Calabar Teaching Hospital said they could do their job better. One doctor said the best part of the U.S.-funded infection prevention program is that it has helped save lives by conquering an unnecessary fear over HIV. “That is where the beauty of the infection prevention program comes in,” she said.

Since 2000, the U.S. Agency for International Development has worked with local partner Engender Health to fund more than \$30,000 of equipment and

printed materials for the Calabar hospital. Beyond the training materials to prevent infections, the U.S. funded the construction of a theater for performing surgical contraceptive practices, training for staff counselors and outreach to remote local government areas.

### **2. Oiling The Wheel Of Progress**

In rural Imo state, women leaders have high hopes that a single palm oil processing center funded by the U.S. government can spur economic progress and democratic development.

“It will improve the life of women and other people there,” said Monica Okorafor, a member of the women’s organization installing the palm oil “digester.” The machine is the first step in empowering people together to address their common problems, Okorafor said.

With a grant of the equivalent of \$1,400, the Obiwuruotu Women’s Organization, a group dedicated to women’s empowerment in the Imo village of the same name, is working with Enugu’s Global Health and Awareness Research Foundation to install the palm oil digester this year. The money comes from the U.S. Ambassador’s Special Self-Help Fund.

The U.S.-funded machine can pound, press and extract one pound of palm kernels in three minutes and produces an entire drum of palm oil in less than three hours. The 200 women members of the Obiwuruotu organization plan to use the digester to make oil used in cooking, soaps and machinery, using the scraps from the machine as poultry feed.

For less than 15 cents, the women can buy a bunch of palm kernels that the machine can turn into a bottle of oil that sells for the equivalent of nearly a dollar. The women also plan to rent the machine out for the use of neighboring villages. With the profits from the machine, the women plan to buy new tools, expand their community meeting facilities and provide small loans to other women entrepreneurs.

Obiora, the founder of GHARF, said these community benefits are just as important as the money gained from the machine’s operation. Her “greatest pleasure” is seeing attitudinal change for adolescents and women, especially as they discover new ways to be involved in democracy and decision-making, she said.

*Mike Hankey  
Information Officer  
U.S. Consulate General, Lagos ■*