

Thinking globally in Ottawa

Kate Heartfield, The Ottawa Citizen

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People who live in Ottawa -- or any capital -- get used to the idea that projects fail. The bigger the project, the bigger the failure. Best not to try.

It's a don't-stick-your-neck-out kind of town. This is my explanation for the cynicism about global poverty I encounter in Ottawa. There is a big group of development enthusiasts here, of course, and Ottawa has its share of earnest students. But there's a wide gap between those people and the others, the Ottawans who adopt the view that it's too hard or too depressing to help people in other countries -- or that it's not possible anyway.

The annoying thing about this attitude is that it's a misperception. The people who actually know a lot about poor countries and spend time there don't walk around like martyrs, congratulating themselves for doing noble, but doomed, work. In fact, most don't find it as hard or depressing as their neighbours imagine, and they're too smart to work on anything doomed.



Dr. Don Kilby, who spends much of his free time raising money to help Africans in need, worries many of the rest of us don't do the same because the task is too daunting, Kate Heartfield writes.

Bruno Schlumberger,
The Ottawa Citizen

"I laugh a lot there," says Peg Herbert, who founded Help Lesotho three years ago. "I never get discouraged." She was teaching at the University of Ottawa when she started to learn, through a student, about the tiny, poor, mountainous country surrounded by South Africa.

Around the corner from Peg Herbert's New Edinburgh home and office lives Dr. Don Kilby, the director of health services at the University of Ottawa.

During the Jeux de la Francophonie in Ottawa in 2001, Dr. Kilby worked with care providers from Africa. That interaction developed into the Canada Africa Community Health Alliance. Now, he travels to Africa several times a year.

"It's not about sick people and sadness and starvation," Dr. Kilby says. "There's a lot of work to be done but these people are strong and resilient and I see a lot more laughter and songs and smiles and hugs there than I see here in Canada. I think that tells us something great about human nature."

As for it being impossible to make a difference, tell that to the many people -- AIDS orphans, for example -- who are benefiting from Help Lesotho or CACHA.

Health care isn't just a humanitarian issue. Educating AIDS orphans is good for the global economy of which Ottawa is part. Do we want these children to grow up to be aid recipients or entrepreneurs? The time and energy spent being sick, caring for sick people -- even attending funerals -- makes it hard for people in Africa to be skilled and productive.

Both Dr. Kilby and Ms. Herbert say their frustrations have more to do with donor countries than with the work they do on the ground. What's hard is coming back to Canada to drum up money. What's depressing is the cynicism and fatigue they encounter.

When people in Ottawa say this kind of work is hard, what they mean is that the problems are big. Poverty, AIDS, malaria, war -- these make the local light-rail debate look easy. The fact is, though, that big problems can actually be much simpler than the light-rail debate. We know how to prevent the spread of HIV; we've done it here. Get a trucker's wife access to condoms, and you've prevented the spread of HIV.

"In medicine, you treat one person at a time," says Dr. Kilby, who has years of experience treating HIV-positive patients in Ottawa.

Neither Dr. Kilby nor Ms. Herbert are interested in going to Africa to tell Africans what to do. "It's really not about us," Ms. Herbert says. The idea is to form partnerships, learn from Africans what they need, and help them do it.

As Dr. Kilby says, healthy people come from healthy communities. So neither organization is all about money and food and pills. The social and psychological effects of AIDS in countries such as Lesotho are enormous, especially on the children. Ms. Herbert says, "There aren't enough adults to go around." If we want the next generation of Africans to change their continent, we have to give them some kind of childhood, so they can learn to read.

Not everybody can or should tour African villages Hollywood-celebrity style. To an extent, we Ottawans have to trust our neighbours who do go to Africa, who return and tell us whether lives are being saved, schools being built, economies being strengthened.

We can, if we choose, throw up our hands at the immensity of the world's problems and spend our time on this planet thinking only about parking meters in the Glebe and who should run Gatineau Park (both worthy topics to which I've devoted many words). But let's at least recognize that turning inward is itself a course of action with global effects, and it's not the only course available to us.

Sometimes, cynicism is a sign that people are so afraid to look naive, they listen to arguments based on ignorance. Sometimes, cynicism is just a mask for cheapness, laziness or smallness of spirit.

Dr. Kilby puts it in more charitable terms: "Often the reason given for doing nothing is to say that it's impossible to do anything."

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