

YOUNG PROFESSIONAL GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT EXCHANGE PROGRAM (GLODEX):
Empowering the Emerging Generation

INTRODUCTION

Primary organizational partners:

1) The International Research Foundation (IRF) is a DC-based non-profit organization with offices in Accra, Ghana; it is led by an international network of West African board members committed to the implementation of participatory development measures in their home region. Projects in Ghana currently embrace educational assistance and enrichment, community health care, youth empowerment and professional development. Through its Student Volunteer Program, IRF has placed a number of young Ghanaian professionals in enriching internships throughout the US, providing each with invaluable work experience and the opportunity to travel.

2) The United Nations Association of the United States of America (UNAUSA) and the Young Professionals for International Cooperation (YPIC) together comprise the largest grassroots foreign policy organization in the US. With over 180 chapters and 25,000 members, UNAUSA serves as the primary progenitor for policy pertinent to the UN and houses both the Business Council for the UN and the Council of Organizations (private and civic institutions committed to US multilateral leadership in foreign affairs). YPIC-USA is a network of young professional associations throughout the US committed to engaging students and emerging leaders in active, informed dialogue about the UN and its global concerns.

Program Abstract

The Young Professional Global Development Exchange Program (GLODEX) is the revised incarnation of IRF's Student Volunteer Program. As the "exchange" implies, while continuing the tradition of

placing Ghanaian YPs in US work experiences, GLODEX also provides US-based YPs with the opportunity to work in development projects in Ghana. GLODEX is designed for young people seeking to infuse the acquisition of marketable skills with international travel and leadership while contributing to key sustainable development projects.

Ghanaian and American young professionals are tasked with working within their host country's cultural framework by adopting leadership posts in volunteer organizations. Upon their return, participants bring their newly strengthened skills to their communities while maintaining cooperative bonds with their host institutions.

The underlying premise is that young people are best able to achieve their potential as professionals when they are both (a) nurtured by mentors and role models and (b) empowered with projects that they can themselves conceive, lead and execute. In the true spirit of Paulo Freire's doctrine of self-directed empowerment, these young people are given the words, but it is up to them to write their own script.

THE CHALLENGES

The challenges facing youth and their communities are indeed palpable. Though remarkably endowed with natural resources (Ghana has twice the per capita output of the poorer countries in West Africa), the country remains heavily dependent on international financial and technical assistance. However, having opted for debt relief under the World Bank's Heavily Indebted Poor Country Initiative in 2002, Ghana's development indicators proved positive enough to allow the country to move beyond the HIPC status in July, 2004. Despite this, national unemployment tends to oscillate around 20%; what causes alarm is the growing number of young people that this percentage represents.

Recent recessions and market fluctuations have caused tangible depressions in labor markets, particularly in youth sectors in both developed and developing societies. According to a report by TakingITGlobal, an international organization committed to research and action in the field of youth

empowerment, “on average, and almost everywhere, for every unemployed adult, two young persons find themselves without work. The rate of unemployment among young people is higher than that of the general population...this increase in youth unemployment has occurred despite a demographic decrease in young people and an increased level of educational participation within most member states.”

At present, 3 billion people live on less than \$2 a day; in a developing nation such as Ghana, most of these are people between 15-30 and have limited access to gainful employment (at least employment in legally-recognized economies). Considering global population growth, International Labor Organization indicators that show up to 700 million young people entering the labor force by 2010 should come at no surprise. Is this population necessarily unskilled and uneducated? Not completely. While a lot is to be desired with regards to education systems around the world (Ghana and the US included), what is lacking are not skills, savvy, talent nor ambition; what is lacking is opportunity.

THE APPROACH

GLODEX currently operates as a bi-lateral professional exchange program for people who have recently graduated, are in the early stages of their career or, due to the lack of substantive opportunity, are unable to obtain employment in their field of study. The program’s core goals are to (a) help YPs build marketable skills in their field, (b) empower Ghanaian YPs to contribute to their community’s development while serving as role models for their peers, (c) educate American YPs of the field realities of development work and (d) rejuvenate the global UNA network by cultivating innovation and leadership amongst young people .

GLODEX functions in accordance to Paulo Freire’ pedagogy of teacher-student equality in that each participant is afforded the capacity to both teach and learn. Ghanaian participants learn relevant skills and practices through their career-matched internships; at the same time, a mandatory leadership component integrates them into their host UNA’s Board of Directors where they are charged with developing young

professional programs and community seminars on a topic of interest (preferably relevant to the UN and global affairs). American participants are tasked with providing a range of assistance to project managers in Ghana thereby learning first-hand the rewards and frustrations of humanitarian work; part of this assistance will very likely involve teaching and community training, particularly when working with IRF's village health programs, school-assistance projects and entrepreneurial initiatives. Upon their return to their home countries, GLODEX participants are asked to continue their development experience by working through local UNA chapters and building cross-Atlantic support agreements.

GLODEX is funded entirely by private contributions channeled through the administrative offices of IRF and UNANCA. Costs are kept to a minimal by maintaining an almost entirely volunteer staff and delegating operational costs to partners and candidate sponsors. Program expansion in this and other projects has prompted funding interest from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and a \$50,000 grant is pending until early 2005.

STAKEHOLDERS AND CULTURE

While the stakeholders are quite varied, interests can be summed up in three parts: community development (all), professional marketability and employment (GLODEX Young Professionals) and organizational integrity and growth (UNA and IRF). Commanding these interests, however, are a myriad of cultural nuances that must be addressed prior to departure through comprehensive training programs.

Training for American participants must take into account the realities of Ghanaian business practice:

- ***“High-context” relationships:*** project supervisors must manage a greater level of “interpersonality” in business relationships, often functioning simultaneously as human resource managers, surrogate fathers, best friends and legal counsel.
- ***Time:*** Ghanaians run on a “conceptual” time framework and MUCH flexibility must be

exercised in arranging meetings and arrival times.

- **Archiving:** limited availability to what are usually antiquated computer systems means that most data retrieval and archival occurs on an inefficient paper system; the government is undergoing internal structural reform to get national data on unified databases.
- **Maintenance:** Ghanaians are grappling with fundamental issues of waste disposal and infrastructure maintenance. While not necessarily cultural in nature (though some have pointed to a lack of a “culture of maintenance”), the problem is far too pervasive not to consider when designing projects.

Similarly, Ghanaian participants must be made aware that Americans (in general) form one dimensional work relationships aligned to a strict framework of deadlines, agendas and quotas; while working with non-profit entities- such as a UNA chapter- tend to be more flexible, over-all, American organizations run with an eye towards an accelerated “efficiency” (at times, at the sacrifice of interpersonal relationships).

PROPOSAL FOR AMENDMENT

Crash Course in Participatory Development

While expertise in development implementation is a function of a multitude of experience and knowledge sharing through academic case study, it behooves GLODEX organizers to provide all participants (both YPs and their host organizations) with training workshops in the core elements of participatory development. This should include case studies illustrating models for social marketing, stakeholder analysis, capacity building and, most importantly, how best to navigate cultural nuances. For instance: sustainable development is often predicated on the ability of communities receiving assistance to sustain behavioral

changes or maintain newly developed infrastructure in the absence of aid workers. An overview of development projects will show that an important factor of sustainability is the transfer of authority and accountability to local leadership frameworks. In the example of the Sudanese famine crisis in 1998, it was clear that failure to integrate distribution of aid with the area's indigenous kinship system contributed to a persistence of malnutrition; by negating local hierarchies and social networks, projects will result in reduced efficacy and limited ability to meet the community's needs.

In Ghana, the ancient system of chieftaincy pervades every facet of society; while the country's constitution provides chiefs with (albeit, limited) power over civil disputes and property rights, these community leaders still represent the nexus of cultural and civic integrity. As the primary land owners of any given region, chiefs wield a level of wealth and influence that can turn both benevolent (as in the generous provision of land grants and rent-waivers) and problematic (there are numerous instances where chiefs "double-sell" land despite existing ownership). Most importantly, credibility in Ghana is predicated on rituals and ceremonies that are presided over by chiefs who in turn provide "blessings" over community initiatives.

It is therefore important that all GLODEX projects be introduced to these highly respected patriarchs and made credible in the eyes of the community through public ritual. I will offer a personal example: in conducting the formative research for the creation of GLODEX, I visited with a number of projects in villages throughout Ghana. Before being able to discuss my research with project leaders, I was brought first to the chief (with whom I shared a small meal) who later announced my arrival to what was usually a community-wide gathering. I was told in the beginning that in the interest of transparency, chiefs often announced their guests (especially those as conspicuously non-Ghanaian as I) to the whole village, who then were able to perceive me not as an outsider, but as part of their community. In other words, as long as I was "good" with the chief, anything I proposed or planned was deemed credible in the eyes of the village.

Global Classrooms - Becoming an Educator

For the past decade, UNA's Global Classrooms program has grown to a truly *global* network of urban public schools across North America, Western Europe, Asia, Central America and, with the inclusion of Greater Metropolitan Accra, West Africa. Students in this program are typically the most economically disadvantaged and under performing of their peers, with little to no exposure to the fascinating world of foreign affairs. Ghana is unique in that it has developed an almost feverish pride in Kofi Annan, the Ghanaian Secretary General of the United Nations (and easily argued to be the best one of them all). Given the program's infancy in Accra, it is recommended that American GLODEX participants contribute their talent and knowledge to the students of urban Ghana as educators, thereby gaining valuable teaching skills as well.

Interestingly, Ghanaian participation in the US program can prove (and has proven, according to a current pilot) to be remarkably significant. Because Global Classrooms resources are exclusively reserved for urban and rural public school systems, Ghanaian GLODEX members have an opportunity to make a great impact amongst a constituency that has typically never met nor interacted with anyone from beyond their county line or district ward (surprisingly, the impact is the same in rural Nebraska as it is in Houston, Texas). As Global Classroom teachers, Ghanaian young professionals can develop lesson plans and curriculum that can also be shared with the global network, thereby truly capitalizing on shared knowledge.

Considering the Brain Drain

A major consideration, particularly for GLODEX recruiters in Ghana, is an issue that plagues all developing societies: the Brain Drain, or rather, the exodus of a country's intellectual and professional work force because of likelihood for better economic return elsewhere (typically the global North). While all members of GLODEX are currently accepted on the assumption that they will return to their home countries, this is not always enforced. While one can request concession to a legal contract, this kind of enforcement is

questionable. What would be more effective would be to use the pending USAID grant for micro-credits that Ghanaian members can apply for with project proposals. In the absence of proposals, returning Ghanaians can be given salaried positions as project managers in existing IRF projects. In doing this, GLODEX achieves two of its most fundamental goals: the gainful employment of a young professional and sustained development.

CONCLUSION

While GLODEX does not seek to resolve the global labor shortage nor promise to provide subsistence to all unemployed youth, it does achieve something that could very well lead to these mammoth goals: an increase in agency amongst the leaders of tomorrow. As cliché (and prolific) as it may be to tout the virtues of “preserving today’s world for those that will inherit it tomorrow,” this mantra renders said inheritors as passive recipients rather than activists that must live with both the current realities of poverty and the consequences of (often unfulfilled) political promises. That said, I am not arguing that all development policies should concede to the desires of young people. While youth movements risk hubris (and efficacy) in assuming expertise without life experience, there is a mirrored arrogance amongst development “elders” who automatically assume that they *always* know what is best for young people without critical dialogue.

What GLODEX offers is a forum for the established and emerging generations to share experiences and, in doing so, transfer knowledge. While also serving as “hands-on” training for those who have already dedicated their young lives to humanitarian causes, by not requiring professional nor academic expertise in this field, GLODEX also *introduces* the plethora of untapped young talent in other disciplines to ways that they can also offer assistance. GLODEX is a cross-disciplinary approach to development that relies on participation and shared knowledge (between youth, their mentors and their communities). The program equips young people with skills, guides them through hands-on training, but *trusts* them to implement development according to their own dialogue with their own communities. In other words, GLODEX believes that if the world is to be left for the leaders of tomorrow, these leaders have to start leading *today*.