

A Different Perspective: Food for Thought

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Far removed from the comforts of Irish living, and leaving behind my family and friends, it was with great hope and aspirations that I left to come to Nepal. Not knowing what to expect, I was warmly welcomed into my new home and I settled in like a local.

Volunteers in Irish Veterinary Assistance (VIVA) is a non-profit, non-governmental organization which, like AHTCS and Bothar, strives for sustainable agriculture development, working to improve the livelihoods of impoverished subsistence farmers. My first involvement with VIVA happened when I was still studying at university. I was the lucky winner of the VIVA summer scholarship and had the great privilege of working with needy farmers in Uganda, Africa for 6 weeks. I worked alongside representatives from Bothar and Heifer International. The impact was tremendous, both for the farmers and me. From then on, I knew I wanted to pursue further involvement in this line of work and I promised I would return with more experience.

One and half years after my graduation from vet school in Dublin, Ireland, I took the chance and went for the interview for the Viva Nepal post and here I am. Now I am delving deeper into the realms of Nepali life but I must take a step back and remember why I am here-for a different perspective. Looking at an issue from different angles and through the eyes of another is a powerful tool in visualization improvement and change.

"Only now that I am blind can I truly see" King Lear, Shakespeare.

And only when you understand that your view is not the only view, can you really appreciate the wealth of experience that other people have to offer. Cooperation and openness are essential to building a strong working relationship. Everyone has gifts and strengths that our creator gave to us, but we all have our weaknesses. When a friend points out our shortcomings, it is not to humiliate, but to highlight an opportunity for self improvement.

International aid is a funny game. In one way, it is like throwing a pebble into an abyss, fighting off the relentless tide of poverty. People argue that it is futile. Certain types of aid can actually be counter-productive, creating dependency and making the poor, more poorer. Many believe that the work done by development agencies will always be overwhelmed by WTC rules and regulations, World Bank technicalities, open market distorting subsidies, trade tariffs and crippling world debt that prevent third world countries from reaching prosperous economic development. These are big wheels and the cogs are slow to turn, but what can we do?

NGOs are small effective organizations and if enough of them pull together, we will start to set the vehicle of change into motion. NGOs bypass governments and can work directly with its beneficiaries, listening to their needs. Funds are channeled directly with no room for corruption. There are no hidden agendas or tied aid. We have the freedom to openly criticize injustice and inequality without fear of losing funding. We may be small but we pack a big punch. Nothing comes from nothing and everything must have a beginning, so if we keep trying and don't give up hope, we will make a difference.

Truly sustainable development is based on education and empowering the poor with knowledge and skills that they need to lift themselves out of poverty. If you give a man a fish he will eat for a day, but if you teach him how to fish, he will eat for a lifetime. VIVA's goal is to help the farmers of Nepal boost their production and improve the way they farm. This will ultimately lead to better livelihoods and security for the family's future, especially in times like these when all we hear about is the global food crisis. We are not givers, we are teachers. And we do not plan to feed the world, we will teach the world to feed itself. (Source: Sandesh, AHTCS, December 2008, page-33)