Reflections on a Troubled Experience in Malawi

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After more than two decades of what the author perceived as successful work in Malawi, she experienced a failed venture, for which she had held high hopes. This story recounts that experience and her reflection on what went wrong with a good idea. The reflection centers on her failure to account for one core competency and several other selected axillary values/attitudes, skills, and behaviors. The common thread throughout this reflection is that failure to collaboratively communicate in order to develop a shared purpose for a plan of action caused the project to fail. Without such a shared purpose, one or the other parties may lack the commitment to carry through.

GLOBAL COMPETENCIES

This chapter explores three critical values and global competencies from a diverse international perspective:

Values and Attitudes:

- Openness to new opportunities, ideas, and ways of thinking.
- Valuing multiple perspectives.
- Questioning prevailing assumptions.

CASE BACKGROUND

When I was middle school age, my father moved his family to a farm in rural West Virginia. The farm had belonged to his ancestors from the 1850s, but had been abandoned for some time. The house had no electricity or running water. And because no one in the area had ever had electricity, it took my mother a few years to convince neighbors that we needed it, something she had to do before the power company would run a line to the area. In many ways, my life during those years paralleled much of the African life I later came to know. We washed our clothes by hand; in the summer we bathed in the creek; we walked over two miles to school, a distance equivalent to most African children's walk to rural schools. As I grew older, I saw the plight of uneducated Appalachian women, worn down by abuse and poverty. The specter of such a future for me pushed me relentlessly toward education.

Years later in 1998, when I went to Malawi with a development grant to work with primary school teachers and to study teaching and learning under circumstances unimaginable to American teachers, I saw much that I could relate to personally. I also saw the lack of support for girls' education – the treatment of girls compelled to clean school classrooms and latrines; the sometimes subtle but mostly overt discrimination toward girls by teachers in the classroom; families pushing young girls into early marriage to relieve the family of another mouth to feed. Knowing that education had been the key to changing my destiny, I became immersed in furthering education opportunities for all children, but girls especially, and in supporting women in a patriarchal society.

My work in various African countries has spanned almost two decades and includes activities from the village level to the government level. Although I have been involved in development activities in Kenya, Nigeria, South Sudan, Zambia, and Egypt, the deep and on-going relationships I have established are in Malawi. In Malawi specifically, I was on the team that developed a bachelor's of education program at Domasi College, a five-year USAID project completed in 2006. During 2010-2012, I headed up a team that implemented a Global Health Exchange (sponsored by the United States Department of State), which brought community-based health professionals from Zambia and Malawi to the United States to participate in seminars and an internship. Those professionals returned to their home countries to implement projects they had designed for their work or communities. It is that program that took me into villages to see the projects and study their impact. Because the focus of the grant was on women's health and reproductive issues, many of the projects centered on improving knowledge of nutrition, educating families on the importance of health care during pregnancy and delivery, establishing gardens to provide better nutrition, and developing small entrepreneurial ventures to assist women in providing for their families.

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