

Illinois Professor Brings Students to "Real Africa"

Matt VanderZalm, International Engagement, Communications, and Protocol



photo by Richard Akresh

For many Americans, envisioning life in Africa likely includes images of civil war, disease, and jungle safaris.

While these stereotypes are not derived from complete fiction, the "real Africa" paints a decidedly different overall picture. A group of Illinois students who joined economics professor Richard Akresh on a trip to the western African nation of Burkina Faso last January learned firsthand that Africa's stereotypes are far from accurate.

Akresh, who first visited the region while working in Togo for the Peace Corps, asked the students before they left to describe what they expected to see during their trip. Most who responded mentioned the same stereotypical images most Americans would likely list.

"In doing a trip like this, you try to dispel preconceived notions," Akresh said. "We aren't going to go on any animal safaris, or visit historical sites. You go to eastern Africa to see animals. We're [in western Africa] to interact with the locals."

Upon arrival, the culture shock became quite evident among the students. "Some of them were overwhelmed; some had never left Illinois, so this experience was for them really quite shocking," Akresh said.



photo by Richard Akresh

After spending a few days in Burkina's capital, Ouagadougou, the group headed north to a camp at the edge of the Sahara Desert, visited several project sites, and ended with a "home stay" in a rural village, where they worked with a small Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) on a number of public works projects.

In every village the students visited, the entire population greeted them, always with a gift and a smile. In one instance, the students were presented with a live goat. Then the villagers joined the

Illinois students to teach them about the irrigation or micro-finance projects going on in their village.

One aspect of life in Burkina that took some getting used to was the inconsistent availability of running water for bathing. One hotel the group stayed at was unable to accommodate this basic need.

"Most nights we were taking bucket showers," Akresh said.

Brock Williams

Having studied the economic statistics of the country in our class before we left, the situation sounded so grim that I think most of us were expecting to be overwhelmed with people's suffering, but instead were impressed with the people's resiliency, and their ambition in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

Having traveled in relatively wealthier developing countries like China and Brazil, this trip to Burkina really helped me to grasp the disparity existing within that blanket term "developing country."

Also, after visiting several different aid organizations and project sites, I learned that even the smallest amount of resources can have an enormous impact if put in the right hands and toward the right projects.

I really enjoyed interacting with the students at the university in Ouagadougou. It really brings things home when you interact with someone in your peer group in a different country. It particularly helped me to realize the opportunities we all take for granted as students in America.

Marlyn Rodriguez

After reading the description of the program, I knew that I absolutely had to go on this trip. I felt this was a once in a lifetime opportunity to experience rural life in Burkina Faso. And quite frankly, I don't think I experienced rural life per se - because we were very well taken care of with food and a continuous supply of filtered water. However, to experience firsthand the dry and dusty air; the challenge in some areas to gain access to potable water; and the large amount of garbage in plain sight really brought to life the challenges these towns in Burkina Faso face. It's difficult to gauge everything I have gotten out of this trip - I feel like processing the trip is ongoing. Nonetheless, one factor I can say has stuck with me is feeling a rekindled hope that development *is* possible for poor countries given it is done in a comprehensive manner. It can be really easy to study development in an office or classroom, look at a few cases, and write a model which is what happens all the time and repeatedly shows mixed results. However, the trip to Burkina shed light as to why these elegant models seem to fail more often than succeed.

I remember visiting an elementary school with one of the NGO's, and seeing a great number of both boys and girls there. NGO representatives then went on to state several statistics in regard to attendance rates by age and gender of this particular school versus another nearby. Over 70 percent of the village children attended this school whereas the other school had attendance rates of over 30 percent. He then explained the difference: this school was built in accord with the town. The NGO set up an agreement to provide the materials, and the village would provide the labor. Because the villagers had invested their labor into this school, they felt a greater need to

find ways for their children to attend it. That has impacted me because it's easy to build models, but having experienced firsthand how taking the needs of these communities into account can result in drastic tangible results definitely left an impression.

Mackenzie Barron

Having minimal international experience (Canada and England) before the Burkina trip, my idea of global environments was limited to third party portrayals of life in Africa. In many cases, the basic needs of each village are still unfulfilled. Access to food, clean water, medical facilities, and education is starting to spread to more rural villages. The impact of a newly provided water pump or school can be tremendous to a village.

Surprising myself, at no time did I feel uncomfortable. Being transplanted into a country across the world with a wildly different culture than the U.S., I adjusted quickly and enjoyed every moment of the trip.

During the trip, I was not able to communicate with most of the population. The few Burkinabe I was able to talk with, I am still in communication with today. Text messages and email from Burkina are a monthly occurrence.

During our time there, we were introduced to many different organizations that were trying to help improve Burkina Faso. One organization, PLAN (Originally named 'Foster Parents Plan for Children'), accomplishes this through child sponsorship. If a child meets certain conditions such as a good attendance record at school, then she or he can be sponsored.

I met a family with a daughter, Zonabo, who I chose to sponsor. I have communicated with Zonabo and her family through the organization several times. The relationship will continue until she turns 18-years-old. Knowing that my sponsorship dollars will directly impact her village is amazing.

Having taken Professor Akresh's course in developmental economics, I was exposed to many aspects of developing countries. Traveling to the country in a small group with a very knowledgeable professor was a great way to experience the economics of development.

Researching the country prior to the trip and experiencing it firsthand, I wanted to be able to come up with my own conclusions about the way of life in Sub-Saharan Africa.

I came home with one big takeaway. Although the Burkinabe are living at one of the lowest standards of living in the world, they are a very happy society. The language barrier was difficult at times, but overall most people were very friendly and willing to show our group their country and culture.

All in all, the trip abroad was a great success. The students learned about not only life in the small African nation but also about the problems facing the happy but impoverished people.

"The students got an enormous amount out of it," Akresh said. "We convinced them that there are no simple answers for [the Burkinabe's] problems.

Akresh said he would like to organize similar trips in the future to the African continent, but such a trip incorporates a prohibitively high cost. The cheapest flight available for the trip to Burkina was nearly \$2000.

"The food is cheap. The hotels are cheap. The airfare is astronomical," Akresh said.