

The Seattle Times

Hope and progress in the developing world, despite daunting challenges

Friday, July 23, 2010

By Danielle Nierenberg & Molly Theobald

Projects that empower people in developing countries with a means of expression are key to helping communities combat hunger and poverty themselves. Guest columnists Danielle Nierenberg highlighting and Molly Theobald argue that the people are capable and ready, they just need the tools.

FOR most Seattle residents, global hunger seems like an impossible problem to solve. Reports of famine in Niger or the thousands at risk for starvation and malnutrition in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, seem not only far away but impossible to change. A local organization, however, begs to differ.



The Seattle-based Bridges to Understanding uses digital technology to empower and connect children around the world. Students participating in the Bridges curriculum are taught to use cameras and editing software to develop stories about their community and culture. These videos, comprised of a photo slide show with a running narration, are then shared with the Bridges online community, which is made up of schools in seven countries around the world.

For many students, it's the first time they have ever even held a camera.

"At first, the prospect of designing, shooting and editing a movie seems insurmountable but then they produce these beautiful films," says Elizabeth Sewell, Bridges Program Manager at the Rural Development Foundation's (RDF) primary school in Kalleda, a small village in the Warangal district of Andhra Pradesh, India. "And then you knock down that barrier, you show them what they are capable of doing. And then they can start to approach other, larger and more institutional, problems the same way. Suddenly, in their own eyes, there are no limits to what they can achieve."

Since the 1980s, international investment in agriculture has decreased significantly. These cuts have impacted women and children the most. But in addition to making sure we reverse these trends, we need to ensure that funding is used effectively — reaching the farmers who need it most.

Who better to consult — and to equip with the tools to help out — in the global effort to combat hunger than the youth, women and farmers who will most benefit from it?

In South Africa, the organization Food and Natural Resource Policy Analysis Network is using theater to engage leaders, service providers and policymakers; encourage community participation; and research the needs of women farmers through a project called Theatre for Policy Advocacy. Popular theater personalities travel to communities in Mozambique and Malawi and stage performances using scripts based on the network's research, to engage members of the community.

After each performance, community members, women, men, youth, local leaders are engaged in facilitated dialogues. The dialogues give all community members — especially women — a chance to openly talk about the challenges they are facing without upsetting the status quo, empowering them to speak about what they need from aid groups and their community.

In Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Mali, and other countries around the world, the Africa Rice Centre is using farmer-made instructional videos to help rice farmers share various new methods of improving rice production with each other. The strong presence of women in the videos also helps local NGOs and extension offices — which tend to be made up mostly of male agents — engage women's groups.

Projects like Bridges, Theatre for Policy Advocacy and Farmer to Farmer Training Videos — that provide a forum for those who might not otherwise have a voice — allow for the spread of important information, empowering the very people who will most benefit from, and can play the largest role in, the alleviation of global hunger and poverty.

They are ready. All they need are the tools.

Danielle Nierenberg, left, is co-project director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project (www.NourishingthePlanet.org) and Molly Theobald is a Food and Agriculture Research Fellow at Worldwatch.