

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Life after ICWA

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Dear Peter:

My fellowship in southern Africa influenced my search for "life after ICWA" by nudging me away from a previous goal of working in development or doing media work in that field, and pushing me into the broader arena of international human rights.

I'm sure it was apparent to anyone who read my essays that my primary focus was not to learn a lot of technical knowledge about agriculture, although the blurb at the bottom of each newsletter proclaimed me to be studying "the societies, economies and food-production systems of southern Africa." I won't ever be hired as a technical consultant on agriculture. What I did learn, however, was something impossible to grasp from studying agricultural economics at a university. I learned a deep respect for southern African societies. I met people who survived and thrived amid poverty and corruption; people who dreamed of democratic systems and better lives. I found a more complex, hopeful region than the disaster-prone basketcase so often portrayed.

The problems are all there but so are the remedies, which are present in the motivated and sincere Africans who want to find their own solutions. They rarely get the chance. Instead, well-paid expatriate "development jet setters" fly in to consult on the latest, fashionable problem. Eventually, they make the decisions that affect the region's families, their jobs, culture and self-respect. I witnessed so much resentment by southern Africans of these foreign "experts" that I questioned whether I wanted to work in development again. Westerners, who might have had to settle for mediocre work at home, set up development agencies with budgets from international donors. I saw clear fads in project funding: women, AIDS, micro-enterprises, street kids, etc. Yet I saw little results. And I felt reluctant to join other expatriate workers in a field that hasn't shown much long-term success. An unpleasant but accurate skepticism has emerged out of my experience as an ICWA fellow. I have learned to be more discerning about the outsider-inspired development in southern Africa. I had visited too many donor-funded schemes that only

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Casey C. Kelso, a fellow in southern Africa from 1991 to 1993, now works as a press officer for Amnesty International in London.

function due to the continuing largesse of foreigners. I wasn't optimistic that I could do better if I worked for just any group.

During the fellowship, however, I did identify a few organizations that succeeded in creating sustainable projects by thoroughly consulting local people and analyzing problems before committing money. With the right group, then, I could assist with locally initiated projects. Oxfam UK, at which I applied to be the country representative in Zimbabwe, was one of those groups. Oxfam doesn't do development, they "facilitate" or "progress" it. The group defines development as "constructive change which allows people less precarious or more fulfilling lives, while maintaining their dignity, encouraging their self-determination and acknowledging their cultural styles and priorities."

There were other reasons why I wanted to work in southern Africa. The experience would have been invaluable, because I would have had more responsibility as a field representative for an overseas agency than if I worked in a "home office." I also enjoyed living in southern Africa. And, I admit, I didn't want to go back to America and be unemployed. Letters from friends in journalism described massive layoffs and many newspapers failing. A commentator aptly called print journalists the "road-kill on the information superhighway." One particular rejection letter confirmed it: "We had many highly skilled applicants and your application was one of over 400 that we received for this project," the letter stated. Four hundred applications for a media job paying little more than \$10,000 a year astonished me.

Locally initiated development groups, I reasoned, might be more responsive to local African communities. And United Nations agencies often hire locally, so I had a better chance for a job if I was already living in Africa. Therefore, I searched local papers for development-related job advertisements and ended up applying for positions at the Southern Africa Communications for Development Institute (SACODI); the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF); and the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT). And I thought it tedious to explain ICWA's acronym!

South Africa also held a great deal of possibilities after apartheid was officially toppled. Many interesting jobs had opened up at a crucial time in that country's troubled history. So I applied to be head of media and resources for the National Land Committee in Bramfontien, South Africa; a researcher/writer for the Human Rights Commission in Natal; and a journalism training coordinator for media workshops across South Africa.

As it turned out, I was turned down by everyone. As one reluctant employer put it: "By hiring a local person, there's just one less person unemployed in this region. And you will never be able to work in the local language as effectively as

someone born here." I couldn't argue because such an attitude is justified. Hiring someone born in Africa meant developing the professional capacity of at least one more person in the region.

There was another reason that I wasn't hired. In any field related to development, at least a master's degree is often needed. Those with whom I competed for jobs had master's degrees in agriculture, economics and public health, while others even had doctorates. Experience counts, but an advanced degree is the clincher for development employers. Clearly, I must eventually get a masters or Ph.D if I want to work in the development field.

I switched tacks. I lacked qualifications to find a job in development and there weren't any jobs in journalism. But I did have my ICWA experience in writing about development. So I began applying in the United States for writing and publicity positions with international development agencies. For example, I sent off an application to be an "educator on hunger issues" at the Bread for the World Institute on Hunger and Development, a Washington D.C.-based group that does research, publishes analyses and provides educational events about the causes of and solutions to hunger. Another post I sought was with CARE, which wanted someone to research, write and disseminate project information to its marketing staff in Atlanta. I was put off by the idea of writing to market development projects, yet I applied for that job and another CARE position as a public relations specialist. That job description also seemed commercial: "to increase visibility through the media, develop media strategies, write releases, fact sheets and other materials, work with artists and actors, and work with stores and other outlets to place CARE materials."

A third group, InterAction, advertised for a media associate to help organize publicity campaigns. Interaction is a coalition of more than 150 private and voluntary organizations working in international development, refugee assistance, disaster relief and public policy. It seemed ideal: the Washington D.C. group's goal is "to stimulate national interest in and to influence public attitudes about international relief and development."

There were other jobs writing about development for which I also applied, but sooner or later the rejection letters found me in Zimbabwe. So I prepared to leave Africa nearly two months after my fellowship ended, wondering if I'd settle for something less international like managing fast-food restaurants. With much trepidation, I filled out my last three job applications.

One position was in Africa, selling condoms in "the private sector." (You can't get more private than that.) Population Services International believes the best way to promote condoms is to sell them privately, as a business, with subsidies for start-up costs. Such a private sector approach to this important development issue interested me. Overpopulation is a theme that,

in hindsight, I can see runs through my essays. In Zambia, too many people meant chimpanzees became commodities. And in Malawi, Zimbabwe and Lesotho, I wrote about land shortages, economic pressures and urbanization caused by too many people. The second job was in London with International Alert, a conflict resolution group that wanted someone to develop networks to resolve violent conflict within countries and reconcile parties at war with each other. More importantly, it also uses preventative diplomacy in identifying potential conflicts and promoting dialogue.

About this time, I began to wonder if I would end up in law school, given the general trend for former fellows. One of my initial interviews at ICWA was with Sam Levy, who concluded his two-year stint in Mozambique and became a Wall Street attorney. Both my ICWA avuncles, Kendal Price and Bowden Quinn, are now lawyers. And after finishing her fellowship, Carol Rose promptly enrolled in Harvard Law School. Faced with such a prospect, I grew alarmed. Long-range goals are tested in such circumstances. At a time when I saw only closed doors, I began to joke about what seemed to be my last option: the CIA. After all, the CIA is always looking for people who are interested in international affairs, quick on the uptake and can write cogently about policy issues. The Agency openly advertised for intelligence officers in the job bulletins to which I subscribed. It even placed ads for "biological and alternative weapons experts" who had to have knowledge of chemical and bio-hazardous methods of mass killing.

My third and last application went to the International Secretariat of Amnesty International in London, which wanted a press officer "to communicate its concerns about human rights to international media." The job advertisement struck a responsive chord in me because, as an ICWA fellow in southern Africa, I have seen firsthand how necessary Amnesty International's work can be. Sometimes I saw freedoms violated in conspicuous ways, such as when Zambian President Frederick Chiluba reimposed a state of emergency and detained more than a dozen opposition members without charge. Other times, I witnessed the hidden hand of suppression slap down personal liberties, such as in Malawi when newspaper journalists were attacked by "unknown assailants." Human rights are fragile on that continent, with few able to defend themselves against authorities who often give no thought to fairness or equity.

After three written tests, an audio test, a video test and a four-hour panel interview, Amnesty International offered me the job. Although it seemed to be a different direction from what I had intended -- writing about development -- I felt honored to accept a position with a human rights organization that protects those vulnerable to imprisonment, torture and execution. I'm now in my second month on the job and I'm enjoying my work there.

Sincerely,

