A Letter from Cameroon
by Gena Barnabee

Development theories, organizational management, service delivery, strategic planning, programs, partnerships, monitoring, evaluation, data, analysis, recommendations, reports, memos… the list can go on and on. But what do these terms mean outside the Evans School, outside large governmental organizations, outside big players of the development world? What do they really mean and how can they be useful to a small organization with a staff of three, who is doing the work of 20 in order to improve the conditions of life for youth infected and/or affected by HIV in a context so completely different than anything known in the Western world?

This is my challenge as a Peace Corps Volunteer posted in the Far North Region of Cameroon; a region where the dry season lasts nine months out of the year, where temperatures can soar to 130 degrees Fahrenheit, where water sources dry out, and where food becomes inaccessible or unaffordable; a region where poverty, gender inequality, disease and death are the norm; a region where French is the official language, but the majority of the population speaks only Fulfuldé or one of the 30 plus local languages found here; where literacy levels are low and employment opportunities are scarce.

However, this is also a region where people are kind, where greetings and well wishes often last for ten minutes, where motivation and inspiration can be found in the smallest places, and where people with no extraordinary influence or wealth, with their own challenges and hardships, dedicate their lives to helping those in need.

In December 2010, I was assigned to work with Education Fights AIDS (EFA) International as a Technical and M&E Advisor. EFA International assists a youth empowerment network they established in 2007, comprised of independent associations of youth infected and/or affected by HIV/AIDS throughout the region. Currently, the network includes eight associations in seven communities, as well as three associations-in-development, and assists more than 200 individual members. In addition, EFA develops programs and activities which educate youth in the areas of health, skills, and capacity-building, and provides them with income-generating, employment, and leadership opportunities.

“...where people are kind, where greetings and well wishes often last for ten minutes, where motivation and inspiration can be found in the smallest places, and where people with no extraordinary influence or wealth, with their own challenges and hardships, dedicate their lives to helping those in need.”

Not unlike small non-profits in the United States, every staff member wears many hats. As Technical and M&E Advisor, I am...
no exception. In addition to the various projects and activities, I have two overarching goals during my service. With assistance from the Board of Directors, a group consisting largely of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers working in various public health and public administration capacities in the United States and abroad, I am the lead advisor using a participatory approach to develop a monitoring and evaluation system for the organization and its programs. My work will also focus on building the capacity of the organization, the staff, and each association.

The first six months at post have been both personally and professionally challenging. Living and working in another language and culture is not easy. Personally, I am never anonymous. People watch and criticize my every move. Outside my house, I am faced with the constant calls of “Nysara” (white in Fulfulde) and every price is inflated. However, I am also the beneficiary of unbelievable inclusion and kindness.

Individuals and families with little for themselves graciously extend invitations to share meals, celebrate weddings and festivities, welcome new babies, and even mourn lost loved ones. Neighborhood children call me by name as I come home, welcoming hugs and high fives, laughing as we play, and saying goodnight at the end of the day.

Professionally, I struggle to sound somewhat intelligible in French and am constantly faced with challenges that shock and sadden me in ways I cannot even express. While leading a project to integrate S-GBV prevention and gender equality education into our Peer Education program, the association members and I had frank conversations on gender, equality, and rights. One particular activity asked members to respond to certain statements by standing in designated corners of the room, which were labeled as Totally Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Completely Disagree.

As the statement, “Men are smarter than women,” was read, I was sure our members, trained as peer educators and becoming empowered members of their community, would completely disagree. Instead almost every single member, most of which were women, chose the Totally Agree corner. One member even said that God made men smarter than women. I tried to respond, but I realized I didn’t know how to explain why that was false; I had no convincing argument to challenge their beliefs.

That night, I cried and couldn’t understand how I, this white, privileged woman, would ever change their minds or make a difference. But as Peace Corps volunteers, this is what we do. We work with engaged members of the community to face these challenges and continue on in the hopes that changing even one mind will make a difference.

“The education against sexual and gender-based violence started with me first. I really had no idea about these issues before and how they could really change our lives.”

-- Female member of AJEPS-Maroua

These first six months at post have been both personally and professionally challenging. Living and working in another language and culture is not easy. Personally, I am never anonymous. People watch and criticize my every move. Outside my house, I am faced with the constant calls of “Nysara” (white in Fulfulde) and every price is inflated. However, I am also the beneficiary of unbelievable inclusion and kindness.

EFA staff spent the day in Kousseri with members of AJUBS, an association in EFA’s Youth Empowerment Network. Members shared thoughts on their successes and challenges of 2010 and developed their vision for 2011. (Photographic representation of individuals is not an indication of their health status.)
A Letter from Azerbaijan
by Jane Renahan

Few days go by before I am reminded once again how thankful I am to be serving in the Peace Corps. I am a community economic development volunteer in Azerbaijan, a former Soviet country of about eight million people, approximately 90% of whom are Muslim. While half of the country’s population lives in Azerbaijan’s capital, Baku, the rest of the country is under-industrialized and agrarian. The economy of the country relies heavily on oil and natural gas exports.

As I imagine Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in most countries can attest, one of the largest and most persistent obstacles PCVs face is adjusting to and dealing with traditional gender roles. The United States and Western Europe have longer histories of women’s rights movements, whereas most countries in which the Peace Corps operates do not. In training, we’re told about intra-family roles and relationships, cautioned to dress and behave properly, and warned about the difficulty of working with women and girls. One fact that made the most impact on me during training was that there were more women in the legislature during Soviet times than there are now. Back then, education was accessible to both genders, but now some of the poorer, more conservative families don’t allow their daughters to finish high school, much less university; which, in a way, means the status of women in this country has declined since the fall of the Soviet Union.

“Perhaps one of the most upsetting features of this discrimination against women is that many Azerbaijani women and girls don’t seem to get it. That is, they see nothing wrong with the system in which they live.”

Although I was able to intellectually understand facts during training, none of the lectures make emotional sense until I witnessed them in person. When I see a husband demand tea or food from his wife, am stared at when I wear jeans, or a co-worker tells me she cannot go to Baku for a Peace Corps training because her fiancé won’t let her, I can internalize these very different realities.

Perhaps one of the most upsetting features of this discrimination against women is that many Azerbaijani women and girls don’t seem to get it. That is, they see nothing wrong with the system in which they live. It is hard not to become upset by gender issues here, in part because so many of the women are loving, happy, goofy people. My host mother during training was a nurse who would chase me around the
apartment with slippers because she was afraid that cold feet would cause me to become infertile. She is a single mother of five daughters, who farms all day and then lectures on the importance of girls being intelligent. Even though her daughters are grown, she still perches on her bed and gives weekly oratories on the need for a kindergarten in the village.

I have five host sisters, all of whom I love. We play games, talk about boys, and yell at each other when they make fun of my language skills. Women I don’t know have bought me tea and force-fed me bread on long bus trips. My old, slightly senile neighbor hobbles over every few days, tells me I’m beautiful and offers me different Azerbaijani men in marriage. When a girl gets engaged, every woman in her family comes together to cook for hours and prepare for the party. When a baby is around, the child is showered with attention. The relationships women have with other women are incredibly strong, and I often envy them and their community.

As I fall in love with practically every woman I’ve met in this country, I begin to realize that there are some people who understand that things can be different. On Women’s Day during my youth writing club, a girl wrote that she did not like the holiday because it was started for good reasons but is now just an excuse for shopkeepers to make money. Instances like this drives many of the volunteers in my country to run programs geared towards women and girls. Even for programs not specifically geared towards women, PCVs are mindful of ways to include women.

With the help of a Peace Corps-wide initiative called Women in Development/Gender and Development (WID/GAD), PCVs organize women’s discussion groups, business classes, and leadership trainings. Girls play sports with PCVs and our countrywide softball program is a co-ed league in which everyone bats, everyone fields, and everyone learns about teamwork. During our first scrimmage, a group of older boys came to watch and decided they wanted to play with my group girls. I was fearful the girls would become overshadowed, but we enforce rules about sharing the limited number of gloves and taking turns batting, and we purposely mix up practice partners and teams. These are small steps but I am overjoyed the older boys are even willing to play with the younger girls.

I have to constantly remind myself that change that comes in small amounts is still change. A co-ed softball team might not be what I had in mind when I joined the Peace Corps, but it’s a step toward working with larger groups of women on projects in which they’re interested. I also find motivation in seeing what my fellow volunteers are doing. Everyone is dedicated, thoughtful, and optimistic.

I have so much hope for the people in this country. I recently attended a soccer tournament between PCVs (including three women and Evans student Brad Kessler) and country nationals. It was fantastic watching American women kick butt, but not as rewarding as when one of my girls hits through the gap for a double.