

Volunteer Technical Assistance: James Thibeault Brings Knowledge & Hope to Kenyan Handicrafts Group

ACDI/VOCA uses a database of more than 10,000 volunteer consultants to provide technical assistance to entrepreneurs.

Life has always been a challenge for women living in the slums of Nairobi, Kenya, but with HIV/AIDS prevalence rates as high as 10 percent in Kenyan women (6.7 percent overall), women who were already struggling to provide for their families are increasingly having to cope with the extra responsibilities resulting from the deaths of husbands and other family members and to undertake the care of AIDS orphans. Many are HIV-positive themselves and are unable to do physically intense work. This decline in productivity has highlighted the importance of less energy-taxing income-generation activities for affected communities.

Not being physically demanding, handicrafts—such as textiles, batiks, pottery, beadwork and woven products made from banana fibers—are an important source of income for these women. Jisaidie Cottage Industries (JCI) was created to market these items, but, although Jisaidie (Swahili for “help yourself”) had successfully brought together producers to work together to access the local market, develop new products and institute quality control, marketing remained a challenge. To gain the knowledge they would need to penetrate new markets, JCI applied to ACDI/VOCA’s Farmer-to-Farmer Program in Kenya to receive expert guidance from a short-term volunteer.

Choosing the Right Host

Once an organization applies for technical assistance from ACDI/VOCA-Kenya, Farmer-to-Farmer Program Coordinator Sebastian Wanjala Oggema uses the Organizational Capacity Assessment Tool (OCAT), developed by USAID and its partners, to ensure that host organizations are able to make the most of technical assistance. In addition to other criteria, the OCAT measures capacity in critical areas such as governance, leadership and financial management. The OCAT disaggregates information and analyzes its significance to the strengths and weaknesses of the organization as well as directs intuitive thought towards intervention.



Handicrafts are an important source of income for HIV-positive women in Kenya.

Most importantly, the OCAT is a scoring mechanism for an institution’s capacity to implement the volunteer’s directives. Having been in existence since 1984, JCI had already gone a long way toward building the company, and it easily passed the important benchmark of organizational stability. However, it scored poorly in operational planning and marketing, which led to a low score in long-term financial sustainability. Further investigation revealed the key personnel whose skill enhancement

would be critical to addressing constraints. They would also be the key interaction points, articulating the organization’s vision and mission and ensuring the volunteer’s recommendations would be implemented. JCI’s proven organizational longevity, its collective approach to solving members’ production and marketing problems, and its unique member circumstances proved it was a good match with the Farmer-to-Farmer program. While these objective measuring tools provide a strong base, field experience also plays a role in choosing the right organizations. “Sometimes knowing a good host is based on intuition,” notes Sebastian. “After you work with collective action clients and agribusinesses for a while, you sort of develop a ‘nose’ for a good client.”

Once JCI’s capacities were fully qualified, Sebastian met with the firm and many of its stakeholders to create a comprehensive scope of work, which included needs and objectives, specific deliverables, and expected outcomes, along with the qualifications the volunteer would need to complete the assignment. The scope of work was sent to ACDI/VOCA’s U.S.-based recruiting division, whose job was to locate and qualify the right volunteer.

Colors of Life

James Thibeault of Malden, WV, was the man for the job. Armed with more than 30 years of experience in handicrafts and marketing, in 2003 he traveled to Kenya to work with JCI to help address marketing constraints. Thibeault helped to transform Jisaidie’s mar-

keting approach through a promotional campaign called “Colors of Life.” The idea was to penetrate European and American handicraft markets utilizing a label specific to Kenyan artisans living with HIV/AIDS. Even the logo reflects the group’s newfound hope, says Thibeault: “The theme is reflected in the use of green and yellow in their products. Green symbolizes life, while yellow symbolizes sunshine or light.” The campaign has been enormously successful, and JCI’s products have already been sold in the U.S. To better reflect this new strategy and to safeguard against identity loss, JCI even changed its name in 2004 to Colors of Life Africa (COLA). In 2005, Thibeault returned to further develop COLA’s marketing strategies and product differentiation in order to scale up the Colors of Life marketing concept.

COLA has been able to expand its business and access credit from a local microlending facility operated by the Equity Bank to finance the transportation costs to the U.S. and to make upfront payments to producers whose regular cash requirements are critical to their very survival. Mr. Thibeault is still active in the U.S. in linking the organization to markets. COLA has evolved into a networking and marketing coordination hub for handicrafts produced by selected rural client groups. It promotes the products of over 200 Kenyan groups and individuals. As an added-value service, COLA also provides training and advisory services to partner organizations, with the assistance of rural development organizations.

In November 2005, Ms. Isabel Mwangi, an owner and the marketing director of COLA, won the “Best Woman Entrepreneur Award”

and the “Most Successful Entrepreneur Award” under the UNDP-organized Year of Microcredit Activities and Global Microentrepreneurship Awards.

“One thing I know is that without James Thibeault there would be no Colors of Life. JCI would still be there subsisting, but there would be no sales to the U.S. and definitely no credit facility to support an enterprise with potential for growth,” said Sebastian of the assignment. “James, along with the ladies at COLA, came up with Colors of Life, and by facilitating the process and judiciously offering advisory follow up, ACIDI/VOCA achieved one of its key objectives of enterprise development while ensuring that even people living with HIV/AIDS are engaged in income-generating activities, no matter how small.”



James Thibeault, an ACIDI/VOCA volunteer, helped Jisaidie Cottage Industries develop its innovative “Colors of Life” campaign.



Global Focus: Farmer-to-Farmer Program

Launched in 1985, the Farmer-to-Farmer Program uses U.S. agricultural and agribusiness experts in numerous fields, from finance to marketing to agribusiness, to respond to the needs of farmers in the developing world. ACIDI/VOCA fielded the first Farmer-to-Farmer volunteer and has implemented the program in 16 countries. In addition to their technical expertise, ACIDI/VOCA volunteers also inject a spirit of private enterprise, demonstrate the power of personal initiative and build international goodwill.