

GSN Essay Comments
"Angola's Development Conundrum:
What's the best way to work in a rich country full of poor people?"
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First of all I'd just like to say how fun it was to read all of the responses. Your points really touch on a lot of the complexity of working in Angola, and there is so much more we could talk about, and so many things that can't be discussed in a short essay. That said, for those of you who are more interested in Angola may want to visit the following links:

<http://report.globalintegrity.org/Angola/2008>

Global integrity is an NGO and they produce an index each year looking at issues of transparency and corruption, and two of the people who worked on the Economic Justice Project in the past (one ex-pat and one Angolan) collaborated in completing the study.

Also, for those of you who are interested more in how the church engages in public life and in politics, it might be interesting to find the statement released at the end of the Synod on Africa. In it, the bishops make some very strong statements about corruption and also the extractives industries.

<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0904743.htm>

http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20091023/wl_africa_afp/vaticansynodafrica_20091023181918

These are some news articles that discuss the statement, which I have been unable to locate on the Vatican website yet. However, perhaps in a fit of hubris, perhaps justifiably so, I would like to think that the work of the Economic Justice project contributed to issues of transparency and corruption being a major issue at the synod. After all, we have been briefing the Angolan bishops on these issues for five years, urging them to take stances and act, and this is a good example of how they are doing so. Of course, there is no proof that we contributed, and by all means we would not be the only actors—after all, the bishops were from the whole continent, not just Angola. But it takes effort from everyone, not just a few.

A few people wanted more information on how the oil sector was organized and who controls it. This is very complex, because all contracts include part-ownership by the state oil company Sonangol, plus shares from a qualified international oil company. There are also more and more local Angolan companies who get shares in joint ventures. Often, however, these local companies have little technical expertise but are owned by persons in the government or the military and have obtained access to joint ventures through relationships and influence. A great article to understand the Angola oil sector is **Business Success, Angola-style: Postcolonial Politics and the Rise and Rise of Sonangol**. It's a really good read and can be found at:

http://www.ipri.pt/publicacoes/working_paper/working_paper.php?idp=206

Revenue Watch International also has a ‘snapshot’ on Angola that gives an overview of the country in relationship to revenue transparency.

Second, I was happy to read that the large majority of you seem to think that it is worth it to engage in this sort of work, in spite of the costs and the setbacks and slow progress. That helps to keep me motivated, even when frustrated at the slow progress and constant obstacles!

There were a couple of issues that were brought up repeatedly in the comments, and I would like to take the opportunity to share a little more information than what was in the short essay, perhaps to clarify some areas but also to encourage further discussion.

I would first like to discuss a little bit more about how CRS (and other NGOs) work in partnership in developing countries—both with the church and with other organizations. I hope this also helps to address some of the comments of Rebecca Masinde regarding culture and international development, which I really appreciated because it is something that we wrestle with on a daily basis. In most countries (excluding those that are in a severe crisis, conflict or emergency situation) CRS does not implement its own projects—it is always a local NGO, or in the case of my project, the local Catholic Church—that is actually on the ground doing the work. This is for several reasons, the primary ones being culture and also capacity building. First of all, as you all know, the people in the local context know what it is that they want; what their priorities are. People like me working for CRS are there primarily to ask guiding questions (at times people have never been asked what they want so it is not always easy for them to articulate it), and we can help set up systems according to certain global standards, which we do our best to adapt to the local context. Regarding capacity-building, the idea is that local civil society will eventually be able to do this work with very little assistance from organizations like CRS. It is a (often sad) fact that in many cases, organizations have not had much experience in project management, don’t know about improved agricultural techniques, or haven’t been exposed to what policy analysis actually exists to know that if the policies in place in their country are in their own best interests.

It is true that INGOs approach development with their own set of assumptions about what is good for a society, and at times this clashes with local culture—this is often the case with regards to gender issues. At CRS, one must look at the values of Catholic Social Teaching and ask if they are convinced that these values are universal, and therefore adaptable to any context and culture. For other organizations, the question may be about human rights, rather than CST. It’s not always easy or comfortable, for sure, and deserves a lot of discussion.

There were a lot of questions about the efficacy of the Catholic Church to this sort of work, either due to its lack of influence, or its bias. First, I want to emphasize that even when we partner with the Catholic Church, we are working with people regardless of religious belief. We at CRS work based on need, not creed. This message is repeated consistently in our partnerships, and it is a criteria that we use when examining all project proposals. We urge the local Catholic Church to work with other church structures as well. One person asked if this was maybe not a failure on our part to live out the mission

of the gospel, since we do not evangelize. However, our commitment is to carry out the Bishops' commitment to help the poor and vulnerable and to uphold the dignity and sacredness of all life. We have a particular mandate that is motivated by the Gospel, but it is not a mandate to evangelize but to promote human development.

Lastly, I would like to add that CRS does indeed partner with the CEJP in other countries on similar projects (and others). I think we partner with the CEJP of the DRC and Madagascar. If a CEJP expresses interest in this sort of work and we judge that they are capable of making an impact, we will consider partnership. However, there may be times when we think that the CEJP is not the most effective partner for such an activity. This might be the case in a country that is not strongly Catholic. In Angola and DRC, a large part of the population is Catholic and the church wields influence in the society, so it is a strategic choice. In a more Muslim country, the choice might be a local NGO or a group of Imams. Further, in projects such as this, while we may have one primary partner such as the local church, we urge them to work with other organizations in order to have more impact. One of the objectives of my project is on networking and relationship-building; I support the CEJP to cultivate strategic relationships that will help move their agenda forward. However, it is very important that this agenda be an Angolan agenda, and not the agenda of NGOs from North America or Europe. We have shared values, yes, and I assist them in policy analysis, but they must have ownership of the recommendations and what is in the best interest of Angolan society. Sometimes advocacy from other international organizations can even cause setbacks for Angolan civil society. They may have been working to get openings with decision-makers, slowly but strategically, and one too-harshly-worded press release or report from an INGO in Europe can make the government too angry and close those openings, at least temporarily. It is very important for INGOs to be in touch with local civil society to discuss what the impact of their (northern) advocacy may be on the local civil society initiatives.

A couple of people also wondered about the cost of the research we are doing, and I would like to clarify a little bit. These research projects are research for advocacy, not just research for internal purposes. The CEJP researches the oil sector, the diamond industry, and the national budget, in order to learn where there are gaps in transparency, abuses of human rights, and to try to see if it is possible to learn where certain revenues are destined. These learnings are then used to form policy recommendations. Without solid facts and analysis, advocacy activities are not taken seriously. Groups must prove to the government and other stakeholders that they 'have done their homework.'

A couple of people also wondered about the source of funding for this kind of project. Currently, this project is funding by private funds from CRS and five other European Catholic organizations (members of Caritas Internationalis). So, put more bluntly, the funds we are using are those that are donated by individuals in the US and Europe to our organizations, to use as we judge best.