

Southeastern World Affairs Institute  
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Conference Summary  
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Davidson, NC

Now it's time for our conference summary. Jon Sawyer - director of the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting - usually has this task, sitting quietly in the back of the room tapping away on a laptop and then delivering an insightful and witty wrap-up.

Jon couldn't be here this weekend. And I'm not really worthy fill his shoes. But like Jon, I'm a longtime journalist, and I'll never say no to the assignment editor.

This is my second year at the Southeastern World Affairs Institute and once again I am amazed at the quality of the speakers and the high level of conversation about such important matters. This year's topic - Global Issues, Local Responses - caught my eye. I edit DavidsonNews.net. It's a local news website focusing on news in the town of Davidson, North Carolina, north of Charlotte. DavidsonNews.net is in many ways a traditional small-town newspaper that happens to appear daily on the Internet rather than in what we journalists now call the "dead-tree" form.

What does this have to do with world affairs, you're wondering? Davidson happens to be a small town where many people share a global vision. Churches, the local Habitat for Humanity Chapter, students at Davidson College, the local schools all have a broad world view. Within a couple of days after the January earthquake in Haiti, local church and community leaders met to organize a local response. My own website has a category of news called "Davidson and the World," which we use to tag stories about mission trips, fund-raisers, and residents' activities beyond our small town. Our Levering speaker Stephanie Ansaldo reminded me yesterday that we had written stories about Davidson residents who have traveled to Africa with her Echo Foundation.

There are many places like Davidson that understand the importance of local action. And these connections are not at the high level of government or international organizations. They are people to people or town-to-town connections, that make a difference a few people at a time.

With all that in mind, one can't help but come away from a weekend like his with a sense of optimism. Africa's problems, the world's problems, can be solved through global efforts, policy changes, vast sums of money. But they ultimately must be solved at the local level.

GEETA PASI

Our weekend opened on Friday night with Geeta Pasi's talk on the state of diplomatic service in the U.S. Geeta is an American of South Asian background who speaks French, Hindi, Romanian and German and she has been the face of America in Bangladesh, Ghana, India, Germany, Romania

and Cameroon. We heard about her fascinating background and her career, and learned that she and so many colleagues like her are the new face of the U.S. diplomatic corps, bringing a new style of diplomacy to U.S. foreign relations.

She told us that the issues facing our State Department - and our diplomats at their foreign posts - have expanded dramatically.

"Many people think of the State Department as the place to go when you need a passport or travel information. Well that is definitely true," she said, "but we do far more. ... The world is changing."

She recalled how she once had to help figure out how to get a mountain of newly minted coins and currency from Germany to Afghanistan after Afghanistan changed its currency.

Since 2001, she told us, the State Department has faced a range of new issues that were "not part of our world view until then." We now respond to humanitarian crises. We work with FBI and Interpol on narcotics trafficking, nuclear smuggling and human trafficking. We work on wars and regional conflicts, the global economic crisis, climate change, worldwide poverty and food insecurity, and pandemic disease.

Technology also brings new challenges, she said. Who would have thought a decade ago that our diplomats would be working in international forums to discuss a how to develop an international standard to combat distracted driving - because of mobile phones or texting?

"The traditional tools of bilateral diplomacy are not adequate to take on these challenges - many of which are issues without borders," Geeta said.

The State Department is now deeply involved in helping other countries to develop - because it's in our interest. The world is increasingly interdependent, globalization is a reality and it actually feels like a smaller planet. "The state department is acutely aware of this," she said.

She told us about her work today as Director of East African Affairs, and its many challenges, from poverty to piracy. She said Somalia is the most difficult case.

CARRIE WAGNER

Geeta is one who has worked both at the policy level and the personal level.

Then we heard a personal tale, from Carrie Wagner of Asheville (Don Keen's daughter), that

Carrier and her husband worked for Habitat for Humanity International for 12 years, and spent 1991-1994 in Uganda. Last year she had a chance to go back. She talked about her new book "Village Wisdom: Immersed in Uganda, Inspired by Job, Changed for Life."

Her message was one of transformation - how we can help transform the world, and be transformed by the experience.

She said the intent of her book is threefold: 1) to honor and give thanks to Job, whom she met in Uganda, and people like him all over the world - "unsung heroes" she called them. 2) to thank people who serve others, who follow their passion for cause. 3) to inspire others, especially our youth, to step out of their comfort zones.

She offered this moral: "I truly believe that the more cross-cultural relationships we develop ... the better chance we have of reaching world peace, environmental sustainability and global wisdom."

#### SATURDAY

Individuals making a difference in large and small ways was a theme that ran through our conference.

On Saturday morning, we met Michael Brotchner. He's working in Rwanda to help promote and expand the availability of a university education in that country, and to help nurture a new generation of business and civic leaders who will transform the country and promote social reconciliation.

Until this week, his nonprofit organization was called Orphans for Rwanda. It's now called Generation Rwanda - a name change that reflects the organization's focus on Rwanda's FUTURE, not its past. That's important because many people beyond Rwanda know the country mainly because of its past troubles, the 1994 genocide and ethnic violence.

"It's been 15 years (since the genocide)," he told us. "We should never forget what happened." The question is, how do you take it from there.

Michael introduced us to the Rwanda of 2010, which has made tremendous progress. Its leaders have an ambitious Vision 2020 plan, which he called the most ambitious development plan ever for an African country. It's goal is transforming Rwanda into a middle-income economy with a knowledge-based economy of services and industry.

Rwanda is the most densely populated country in the region, and its per capita GDP has nearly doubled in the past decade. Its leaders hope to cut the poverty rate in half in the next decade - to 30 percent.

After the genocide, the state of higher education in Rwanda was bleak, he said. But now, public universities have expanded from 1 to 6. And thousands of students now study at 7 accredited private universities. The number of university students has grown from fewer than 5,000 in 1991 to more than 44,000 now.

Michael talked about his role as the head of Generation Rwanda, taking us from that macro view right down to the local level. He said the program conducts an intensive 4-month search every year for the top talent in the country, from north to south, regardless of income or ethnicity.

The program provides housing, health care and a university education. Students - the best and brightest from their families and villages - receive a stipend to replace the salaries they are giving up to get an

education.

He was asked later how his group takes into account ethnic differences, and the bitter wounds left by a generation of ethnic conflict between Tutsis and Hutus. His answer was a simple one: It doesn't.

Generations - founded in 2004 - now has 174 students and 16 graduates.

The message to prospective students is that a university education is essential - both to them and the country. "Anybody who has experience will have opportunities," he said.

His goal is to create a strong network of Generation Rwanda graduates who can help lead the country. " I want us to run the country - and I want us to run it together .... I want the students - I want the future leadership of Rwanda - to have representatives from the poorest parts. They can't just be wealthy."

Michael talked about the importance of getting Rwandans involved in transforming their own country. Right behind him on Saturday was Jonathan Elliott, a longtime British diplomat who now works on African issues with the NGO Human Rights Watch.

He gave an eloquent outline of the foreign aid picture and local solutions in Africa. "We want to make sure development aid and individual rights kept mutually in focus," he said. He said he looks at international aid not through the lens of the technocrat, but through a political and human rights lens. "I'm not here to say aid is bad," he told us. "What I am here to say is that unless we're extremely careful, aid can do serious harm."

He described the different schools of thought on aid - 1) those who think more is better and that the problem is a lack of money. 2) those who say you need a more technocratic approach. 3) those who think that an over-reliance on aid has create distortions and a dependency culture.

In a handout based on a presentation by Francis Fukuyama, he showed how there can be close linkages between broad aims of economic development and issues like human rights, the rule of law and accountability.

"More aid is not necessarily the best answer," Jonathan said.

He then led us through a horrifying tale of how politics has corrupted the aid structure in Ethiopia. There, one party has ruled for 18 years, in recent years winning 99 percent of the vote in elections. "Every arm of the state is run by member of the same organization," he said. And he offered evidence of how aid programs are used as a tool to force political cooperation.

How do we solve the problem? One answer may be for aid-givers to say no - or to put measurable limits on aid. Maybe three-year programs need to be renewed annually, only after proof that the system is working or has not been corrupted.

Unless we have very effective monitoring, this aid can be use by clever

people for bad ends. In Ethiopia's case, it has helped entrench a culture of one party rule, he said.

We next met Dr. Ronnie Kaddu, a young doctor and native Ugandan who is working on the ground in his country to improve people's lives. He's absolutely one who's life is a local response to global problems. (Incidentally - he told me this is his first visit to the US)

Dr. Kaddu told me last night that during difficult times in Uganda, his family was forced to flee the dictator Idi Amin. So he was raised partly in Nairobi. He later was able to return home. After earning a university degree, he got a master's degree in international health from University of Copenhagen and is finishing a residency in anesthesiology at Makerere University in Uganda.

He helped us see the individual problem of public health - showing us a photograph of the unhealthy lung of a child in Northern Uganda. Already in this child's body, problems were emerging because of indoor cooking over smoky indoor fires with solid fuels. When people come to him with existing conditions such as this, he said, it's hard to think about traditional anesthesia when treating them later. So even as he works in medicine, he has set out to fix other problems.

He described a project he is working on in Patongo, Northern Uganda, which once was ravaged by war. Literacy rates are low and disease - including HIV AIDS - are prevalent. But he has gotten grant money to undertake an environmental project that is helping to change the picture. He said the final part of the project is education - educating the population about environmental degradation and spreading the message: Health is good

Dr. Kaddu said he believes children are an important part of long-term solutions. That's true everywhere, isn't it?

Saturday night we met Wes Bledsoe of Mt. Airy, who delivered his winning Oscar Merritt Essay on the topic "Enforcing the Law of the Sea Treaty Effectively."

Wes told me this was the fourth time he has delivered his winning talk. And he gave us a ray of hope for the future, that our young people will take up the torch we have been carrying.

The law of the sea was a lifelong project of our members Miriam and Sam Levering, and Saturday night we honored their memories - as we always do - with the Miriam and Sam Levering Lecture

Stephanie Ansaldo is director of the Echo Foundation in Charlotte, a family therapist, a school counselor and a community volunteer.

Through the Echo foundation, she is working to encourage others - from students to CEOs - to follow in the steps of the Holocaust survivor and Human Rights activist Elie Wiesel.

She told us about the history of the foundation which was formed at the inspiration of Wiesel himself. And she outlined its many initiatives - from 2nd grade school programs to high school travel and service programs to bringing nobel laureates and other human rights figures to

town to meetings with community leaders and CEOs.

Then she took us in close, for a look at a primary school project that has brought high school students from Charlotte Mecklenburg to Kinya Rwanda. The program has worked with the people there in schools, built a library, and helped establish some of those cross-cultural relationships that Carrie Wagner reminded us are so important.

What's so important about projects like the Echo Foundation's trips is both how the students help others, and perhaps more importantly, how those students are transformed by the experience.

SUNDAY

Finally this morning ... we met an immigration lawyer, Mary Giovagnoli, director of the Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Council. She said the center was set up to counter some of the myths and misinformation out there about immigration - and help combat what she called the current "fact-free debate."

She delivered a fascinating overview of the state of immigration law and policy here - one that has been driven by fear and politics.

She reminded us - as President Obama did in an important recent speech - that we're a nation of immigrants, and that the old complaints about immigrants are oversimplified. "It's an important part of the infrastructure of the United States," she told us. She said the president tried hard in to switch the focus from an "Us vs. Them" battle to a discussion of what immigration really is about - that "the constant flow of immigrants have helped to make America what it is."

Recent legal changes have put additional pressure on the system in ways that have created very complicated and sometimes impossible choices for people. Mary said as the law currently stands, there are now incentives for people to stay here illegally rather than leave.

Every generation of immigrants has been both embraced and feared, she said. Today, with the internet, blogs, viral emails and other electronic media it's easier than ever to stir up fears that immigrants are out to hurt us. Nonetheless, especially since World War II, the U.S. has been able to promote a more humane view of immigration.

She noted that immigrants are an important part of our economy - bringing as much, or perhaps more good - than all the trouble they're accused of.

It seems to me our conference again this year is more cause for optimism than worry. Thanks for coming ... and see you next year.