

Interteam in Namibia

„Our program is much more than the total of our volunteers' work“

Interview with Markus Burri, resident coordinator



Interteam (IT) has been working in Namibia, the last African country to become independent, for 21 years. 21 years is a long time of experiences in which the program was further developed and consolidated. „ We now have to assess the impact of our work in order to plan into the future“, says theologian Markus Burri (44). His analysis of Swiss cooperation for development in Africa and generally in the South is as comprehensive and sharp as his personal experience. The first time he set foot on the African continent was in 1995 when he was a Red-Cross delegate in Rwanda. After that he worked as a delegate for Caritas Switzerland in Bosnia-Herzegovina. His life as a globetrotter in development cooperation also brought him to places like South-East-Asia, Egypt, Algeria and Palestine, where he was working for Caritas in different positions. Then he worked for Caritas in Lucerne, from where he was in charge of the NGO's program in Latin-America and the Caribbean. Since the beginning of 2008 he and his family have been living in the Namibian capital Windhoek, where he is the resident coordinator for Interteam.

In what political and social context do Interteam volunteers work in Namibia?

In Namibia there are 13 ethnic groups among which the *Ovambos* are the largest. More than half of the about 2 million inhabitants belong to this group. This group is the main supporter of the SWAPO-Party, which has dominated the government since independence. 18 out of 21 ministries as well as the legislative and the most important institutions are dominated by SWAPO. There were elections in November last year. For the first time the opposition parties got together in a coalition and discovered irregularities that happened during the elections. In February, the Electoral Commission will have to answer to this accusation, which could lead to further incidents. Namibians don't take much part in political life. There is certain apathy. There are no big mobilisations of people and neither are there many questions being asked. A rather unusual reality, which is not always easy to understand and to accept.

Education as the main focus

The presence of Interteam and Swiss volunteers in Namibia started in the early days of the republic.

Indeed we began working in this country 21 years ago, shortly before independence. In the beginning we cooperated with the Roman Catholic Church, who considered working together with Swiss volunteers as a big chance. The situation then was special because the state as such hardly existed and its structures were still very weak. We had the opportunity to work in education. The first volunteers were teachers, mainly for languages and mathe-

matics, working in the north of the country, which is the most populated area, but where people are the poorest. At this time the church was an important partner. It greatly encouraged the presence of Swiss personnel, who also worked in public education, as the years passed this program developed more and more. This first phase was followed by a second one which aimed at supporting and training local teachers. Through this, the impact of the volunteers' work increased.

Is education still the main focus of the present program?

Yes, it is. This is in accordance with Interteam's institutional program, which includes three focuses: education, health and nutrition.

Presently, we have 12 volunteers working in education in two remote regions of the country. Their assignments are organised regionally and correspond to Swiss federalism. We coordinate our work with the regional Ministries of Education. Our pedagogic concepts are comprehensive. We help developing concepts, we offer trainings for teachers especially in the fields of teaching methods and didactics and we support and train school management. There is a skeleton agreement with the Ministry of Education but our volunteers work locally, in the schools of the region, at present we are preparing an impact study on our program.



The second focus is health. Interteam started working in this field in 1999, mainly at management level. Four volunteers are working in this field. Shortly, we intend to start working in the field of the third main focus of our program, which is nutrition and the creation of jobs in a tourism project.

The importance of evaluation

What is the impact study about? Why is it carried out?

The main motivation is Interteam's interest to find out what the impact of our work is after over 20 years' work in education. We want to know how people we worked with think of the way we work. The study will be participative and will involve seven different groups of stakeholders. Among these are Inspectors of Education, the Regional Office, the learners and the teachers. We want to know if there is progress, development, results. We also want to know what the volunteers' contribution was and what our weaknesses are. We want to find out what we have learned in this process, to get ideas of how to develop our future program. Maybe we need to adapt our program in order to be successful.

I want to emphasize the importance of the participational character of this study. The volunteers are not going to carry out the study in their own working environment but in their colleagues' in order to ensure there is a certain distance and more objectivity.

The logic of the program

The impact Interteam has made in Namibia is recognised in the world of cooperation for development. Which are the most important elements that make this difference?

The main difference is the logic of the program itself. We don't react to every request we get. We are very alert and precise. Every volunteer is a part of the whole program. Our program is much more than the total of our volunteers' work.

Not only are the volunteers part of the program but they also adapt to it. There is nobody in any part of the country who does anything that has not been thought through by others working in the same field. If for example there is a request in the education sector, we discuss this request in depth with our volunteers working in the area. We evaluate if the request makes sense. There is always a process of pre-evaluation. Every volunteer's work is documented and we try to ensure exchange of experiences among our volunteers.

Can you explain what is behind this philosophy?

The volunteers are not isolated individuals but part of a group and a program. They know about and agree with the aims of the program. The success of one person is everybody's success. And so are their weaknesses.

Do your partner organisations actively take part in creating the program?

They didn't participate much in the present program, which is valid from 2009-2012. It was mainly made by the coordinator in cooperation with the head office in Lucerne. We will evaluate and adapt this program halfway through this period, together with our volunteers and partners. We decided to reinforce participation. This is a lesson we have learned. It is easy to gain an overview of the program because we only work with six partner organisations, which makes participation easier.

The regional partner organisations in the education sector are closely connected to the ruling party of the country. Doesn't this sometimes make working together difficult when both partners see the political reality in a different way?

In Namibia, people don't talk much about politics. People tend to avoid conflicts. Direct confrontation is not part of the culture and this would cause friction between the people. The background to this is a complicated history including 70 years of „apartheid“, which doesn't make the dialogue between people of different ethnic groups easier.

The quality of long-term assignments

Are there other NGOs, national or international, with whom Interteam works together on a regular basis?

Yes, for example we cooperate closely on a local, regional and national level with VSO (Voluntary Services Overseas), a British NGO. We plan together and avoid any kind of competition. We meet on a regular basis and exchange ideas. The volunteers too are in close contact. We organise workshops together. We have a common vision and working method when it comes to education. The volunteers from the two organisations meet regularly.

Interteam volunteers do mid- and long-term assignments. On the other hand short-term assignments are preferred today. What do you think about this?

There is no doubt that long-term assignments result in better quality. It is important that somebody who comes here to work has an understanding of the background to the present state of affairs, of the logic of the program in its context. The people come in order to learn, to understand and to discover new things. Interteam's slogan is „encounter, ex-

change, development“. This is what our work is about. There is no development without an encounter first. And this takes time.



In an assignment for three years, the first part will be about adapting to the cultural and social reality. The next phase is the most productive. The third part is also valuable but in general volunteers have different priorities and are preparing their return to Switzerland in the last few months of their stay.

Given these experiences I am very sceptical when it comes to short-term assignments, although there are exceptions. Last year for example we had somebody coming to work with one of our volunteers for two months. This was different and an interesting experience.

It is not always easy for the partner organisations to meet Swiss personnel's demands. What are the experiences in Namibia?

Nearly always, partner organisations are very happy with the quality of the people who came to work with them. They tell us in a way that shows they are surprised. Not only because of the volunteers' professional knowledge, but also because of their social competencies and the will to expose themselves to intercultural experiences. I have noticed that the assessment of the future volunteers and the training they get before their departure from Switzerland are very good. We have very few volunteers who don't finish the full assignment.

Is informing people in Switzerland of the situation here in Namibia a priority? What do your volunteers think about this?

In Switzerland, the volunteers are very important voices from the South. For Interteam, bringing this information to Switzerland is a priority. There is no development in the South without development in the North. This is why the political and social consequences are important. Nearly every volunteer will take part in further creating awareness for the South. This can happen after their return to Switzerland or if volunteers return half-way through their assignment. They organise public events and also inform their family and friends. It is also important that every volunteer writes at least three newsletters per year.

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