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It's All About Hope

It's difficult to thoroughly enjoy a 36-hour journey from Bloemfontein, South Africa, to Colorado Springs, but such a long time under the care of South African Airways does present plenty of time for reflection. Having recently returned from conducting an eight-day economics



workshop in Bloemfontein for participants from around the globe, I'm happy to share some of my reflections on this extraordinary experience. With over 50 educators attending from regions as diverse as Asia and Latin America, the event was undeniably interesting and stimulating.

The workshop, called Seminar B, was the second of four week-long workshops offered through *EconomicsInternational*, a division of the National Council on Economic Education (NCEE) focused on assisting economics educators from emerging economies with content, methods and materials for teaching economics. Seminar A, completed last November in Kiev, Ukraine, introduced these same participants to basic economic concepts, while Seminar C—to be held in Asuncion, Paraguay, in early April—will focus on macroeconomic concepts. The final seminar will feature a return trip to South Africa in June, with international economics the primary topic.

The NCEE is a national nonprofit organization dedicated to promoting economic literacy. While the majority of NCEE financial support is private, the international efforts are funded principally by the U.S. government through the Cooperative Education Exchange Program (CEEP). CEEP, administered through the U.S. Department of Education in coordination with the Department of State, provides critical support of economic and civics education by bringing together American economics educators with their counterparts from central and eastern Europe, the former Soviet states and other developing countries in Asia, Africa, Latin American and the Middle East. Among the 50 participants in South Africa were school teachers, college professors, and education administrators from Indonesia, South Africa, Paraguay, Uruguay, Mexico, Egypt, Jordan and Palestine.



John Brock with two Egyptian teachers



Teachers from around the world

While most of the educators started the course with only limited familiarity with market economics, two participants already held economics Ph.D.'s and wanted to learn new methods for instruction. For example, Dr. Jaime Velazquez, an economist from the University of Panamericana in Mexico City, is organizing efforts to expand training for teachers with the hope of improving economics education throughout his country.

The seminar series is part of NCEE's "Training of Trainers" program, which furthers the organization's objective of preparing a corps of economics educators to train other teachers and ultimately extend economics education to thousands of students around the world.¹ The program, launched following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, has positively impacted economics instruction for thousands of students in countries such as Russia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, and Lithuania, to name just a few. Not only have American teachers had the opportunity to travel to many of these countries to observe economics instruction, discuss economics education, and meet teachers and students, foreign educators have toured the United States visiting our schools and sharing economics-related information with American students and teachers. I have been privileged to host a number of these visiting educators. Such an exchange of culture and educational thinking is the principal goal of NCEE's *EconomicsInternational* programs, of which the Training of Trainers is a vital component.

My 10 days in South Africa went quickly, but the experience left lasting impressions. Almost 12 years after the end of apartheid, South Africa is a country with great promise, but obstacles remain. With an unemployment rate of about 30%, the country continues to experience turmoil and struggles to curb a serious crime problem. As we drove around the city, high fences encircled nearly every home, and the sight of walls topped with devil's forks or barbed wire was reminiscent of scenes from war zones. The distribution of income in South Africa is quite lopsided. By some measures it's comparable to the wealth disparity of Brazil or Honduras. As in so many similar situations, quality education for the poorer citizens, in this case black South Africans, seems to offer some long-term promise for a more equal society. However, in the interim, efforts to improve the integration of blacks into the market economy are urgently needed.

While apartheid officially ended in 1994, remnants of this tragic policy remain. For example, even at the University of the Free State—a university where liberty and freedom should flourish—de-facto segregation lingers, as white English-speaking students often sit in the front of class, while blacks, "coloreds," and other Afrikaans speakers sit in the back. Further, in this country of 11 different official languages, professors at the University of the Free State must sometimes deliver lectures in English and Afrikaans, and occasionally even Sesotho—almost certainly slowing educational productivity. Nonetheless, the rapid progress of South Africa toward freedom is remarkable—and the fact that it was accomplished in a relatively peaceful and democratic manner is even more so. However, the task of creating a unified and prosperous civil society has only begun.

There is no question that South Africans still face many hurdles, but the leadership and inspiration of Nelson Mandela offers much hope for his people. Not only do black South Africans hold former President Mandela in highest esteem, but I was impressed and heartened by the universal respect for this great leader expressed by all South Africans I met, regardless of race or ethnic background.

¹ While this article addresses *EconomicsInternational* programs, international efforts represent only a subset of the overall NCEE objective, which is to strengthen K-12 economics education throughout the United States.

The most gratifying aspect of my experience with Seminar B was to observe the camaraderie between Muslims from Jordan and Indonesia with Christians from Mexico and Paraguay; American faculty laughing with Palestinians and Egyptians; and the heartwarming moment when black South Africans hugged white South Africans after winning a seminar “Quiz Bowl.” The sharing would begin each day with breakfast and end late in the evening with games in the hotel lobby. There were many memorable pictures—one of a mathematics teacher from Cairo negotiating during a market activity with teachers from South Africa, Mexico and Paraguay. And another of an educator from Jordan enjoying conversation with teachers from South Africa and Bali, Indonesia. Within a relatively short time, cultural barriers were overcome and participants were trading, studying and laughing together.



Three South Africans celebrating victory



Everyone wins

Experiences such as this one, while only a microcosm of our larger societies, offer promise for the future. Inquiry into the nature and origins of wealth dates at least to Adam Smith’s 18th century classic, *The Wealth of Nations*, but the answer to the main question he posed may be *the* most important question in all of economics—why are some nations so rich and others so poor? Indeed, the quest for economic growth has been quite elusive for many countries. However, through education and understanding, we hope to offer them the promise of a brighter future.

However significant CEEP’s contribution to economics education, its main benefit may be more implicit and long term—the grassroots teacher-to-teacher interaction and friendships that develop as a direct result of these programs. While politicians struggle in what often appears endless disagreement and negotiation, the participants in these seminars are forming lasting relationships. Perhaps one day, some students who learn economics from these teachers will meet on opposite ends of negotiating tables and find common economic ground that might not otherwise have existed.

South Africa’s long walk to freedom has merely begun, but all of the South Africans I met—black, white, and colored—expressed great hope and desire for a better future in their country and the world. Klopper Oosthuizen, a professor in the agricultural economics department at the University of the Free State, remains cautiously optimistic. After enjoying a very pleasant evening with our local hosts on the last night in Bloemfontein, Klopper turned to me and concluded, “*It’s all about hope.*”

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