

May 26, 2018 From Robert Van Buskirk, rdvanbuskirk@gmail.com

Hi Peter:

This email documents in more detail some of what I communicated in our debrief yesterday.

You seem to be interested/curious to understand why I do my Africa work in the way that I do it.

The primary moral argument/theory that I go by is pretty well described by Chomsky's essay on the responsibility of intellectuals:

<https://chomsky.info/19670223/>

I was a pretty big fan of Chomsky in my Central America solidarity organizing days (30 years ago), and in fact worked for several years with his daughter, Aviva Chomsky (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aviva_Chomsky) on solidarity with Nicaragua.

What about my happiness, enjoyment, sense of fulfillment? In my mind, my happiness and enjoyment of life simply is not a question. I live in California with access to tremendous privilege, so if I am not happy and fulfilled, there must be something wrong with me. I may not have the privilege of a millionaire, but there are a million places that I can go in the world, and I have access to doing a million things...that is enough. Since I live and work in Paradise, I am most certainly happy. The only unhappiness is the moral and political injustices of the world that we must witness every day.

So now, how do I choose what to do and how to do it? Being mathematically and scientifically oriented, the philosophy that best describes the general strategy that I create in order to fulfill my moral and responsibilities is the philosophy of Effective Altruism. See for example:

<https://www.effectivealtruism.org/>

And since I like traveling to rural Africa and working on cool projects, I work in rural Africa. In addition, since I have developed a significant amount of clean energy expertise focused on consumer economics, economic optimization, and the economics of innovation that is the particular area of specialty that I work on in service to rural Africa.

My picture of the role of students and people in the US, is informed by my work 30 years ago as a solidarity activist. We work in solidarity with people in lower-income countries, who ultimately must be the people who solve their own problems. Also, people here have their own interests which are largely disconnected from the interests of people in rural Africa. So when I look at the range of things people are interested in working on over the long term, only a small fraction of our American interests and desires seem really useful to rural Africans over the long term (the majority of activities that Americans are going to do are Americans interacting with Americans, and developing themselves...which for the most part is disconnected from rural Africa and rural Africans). So my interest in what most Americans are interested in, is somewhat limited.

You should also keep in mind, that an entire year of 100% dedicated work, by someone in Malawi costs only \$500 to \$1000. And people in Malawi like doing this work as much as students in Cal Poly do...i.e. they get rather excited doing solar for villagers. So in organizing youthful labor in support of my work, I will tend to focus on recruiting people in Malawi (which you will see by looking at my friends list on my Facebook page).

All of that being said, I should help contribute to building a movement of folks in the US who can work in support and in solidarity with people in rural Africa. And in support of that goal, I will try to learn how to make my presentations more accessible to a wider audience. You will also notice that I support empowering students to work with Aid Africa and Peter Keller, who is much more interested in that movement-building aspects of work than I am.

Being an academic, I am not only interested in movement building but I am also interested in describing knowledge for knowledge-sake, even if the knowledge is inaccessible to most. So I will always include some pieces of less accessible knowledge in my presentations because I want to avoid the sin of omission, and because I want to put in a marker for what I think is a deeper level of understanding that I think is important for a better and more intellectually elegant solution of the problem at hand.

What do I expect will happen in the coming months?

- (1) Students will work on different aspects of our devices/projects
- (2) Some students will produce some measurements that can feed into about two academic papers to be submitted this fall. And one or two students may develop a long-term commitment to the work.
- (3) Kuyere uses what it learns from the collaboration to design and disseminate improved versions of solar home systems with solar electric cookers.
- (4) I visit Peter Keller in January, and hopefully his organization starts producing and disseminating some version of the cooker.
- (5) In Summer 2019, a group visits Aid Africa to help with their cooker work, and a representative visits Malawi to compare and contrast their approach and products with the Malawi approach.
- (6) The Summer 2019 work (and continuing work during the school year) leads to one or two more academic papers being submitted on implementation and impact aspects.

It should be fairly easy to implement these six collaboration steps, and by Fall 2019 the cooker work should be fairly well advanced. Though the details of what the best solar home systems with cooker look like are still largely unpredictable at this stage.

Sincerely,

Robert VB