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Grassroots approach makes peace and change in volatile Niger Delta.

SEATTLE, March 28, 2006 – Amidst recent renewed unrest in the oil-rich but poverty-stricken Niger Delta of Nigeria, and as Nigeria's president heads to the U.S., Seattle-based Global Citizen Journey (GCJ) continues to build bonds of peace between Americans and Nigerians, and between formerly warring tribes in the Delta.

Nineteen U.S. and 21 Nigerian delegates completed a citizen diplomacy trip in December that successfully brought together diverse stakeholders to complete the regional Niger Delta Friendship Library—the first library in the riverine region of the Delta, where literacy is only about 30 percent, and children study without books. The project included construction and staffing of the library, and filling the shelves with more than 1500 books, many of them brought in suitcases by the delegates. The work begun on that trip continues, with additions to the library, as well as a microlending program for women of the community and a documentary film in the development stages. But, more important than any particular project, are the broader implications of a successful grassroots model in a country where public-good initiatives meet roadblocks at every turn.

Says Mary Ella Keblusek, GCJ Nigeria project director, “How can a ‘little’ grassroots initiative like Global Citizen Journey really effect change in a country like Nigeria with such massive and endemic challenges? There was so much we didn’t have: deep pockets, political power, PhDs, international experience. And yet, what we did have—huge hearts, broad shoulders, physical stamina, the financial and emotional support of friends and family and most importantly, a willingness to ‘get real’ with Nigerians in the Delta who have been lied to for so long—made more impact than I ever could have imagined. Not only in the village of Oporoza where we built the library, or the Niger Delta, but as a model to the developing world of what it looks like to cut through the self-interest and corruption at every level of society and actually do what we said we would do. In some amazing way, the mere fact that we came all the way from the Pacific Northwest, partnered with Nigerians and built the library we said we would build, in a place even their own elected officials had never visited, has sown the seeds of self-respect, empowerment and activism that could never have been created by the more traditional forms of international aid. The multiplier effect on those we personally met in Nigeria, those who have heard our story in the media throughout the country, and even on the U.S. delegates and their supporters, has taught me that the grassroots approach has unimaginable power to create the global neighborhood our world so desperately needs.”

When GCJ organizers first started planning for the Nigeria project, most people they talked to didn’t even know where Nigeria is, let alone that the U.S. gets about 15 percent of its oil from the Niger Delta. The story was largely untold of the environmental devastation from oil production and the people’s abject poverty despite sitting on top of the vast majority of Nigeria’s wealth.

With recent high-profile events and subsequent press coverage, awareness has increased. But the region is rife with complicated issues and it’s difficult to get the whole story. “The world feels much smaller after a journey such as ours,” says Susan Partnow, GCJ founder and executive director. “My experience was both enlightening and sobering. Now when I read about events in the Niger Delta, I feel an intimate personal connection and a deep awareness of the complexity behind any sound bites. While I reject any use of violence, I understand the desperation behind the recent kidnappings. Our role as global citizens is to share the many-sided story we learned—corporate, government, as well as indigenous people—and to act as allies who help gain a voice for the Delta’s marginalized people and for the earth itself.”

The library was built in the Ijaw village of Oporoza through the partnership of GCJ and Nigerian NGO Niger Delta Professionals for Development (NIDPRODEV). The library serves the greater community of Ijaw and Itsekiri villages—tribes who not long ago were locked in violent conflict. Their enmity was largely based in frustration and misplaced blame for conditions in the region caused by oil production, inequities in resource control and revenue distribution, and the government’s failure to respond to their dire needs. Despite a cease-fire three years ago—brokered by NIDPRODEV founder and GCJ host country director Joel Bisina—suspicions remained. There had been little interaction until they came together at the library ground breaking ceremony, during the delegates’ visit and for the library commissioning.

“The rare privilege to host this GCJ delegation in the Niger Delta and the dedication, hope, support and enthusiasm shown by all was quite humbling and remarkable,” says Bisina. “With this bold and all-inviting, all-inclusive process, the Ijaws and the Itsekiris of the riverine Niger Delta are saying, ‘we are ready to move on.’ They have realized that the best way forward to effect change is by working together—uniting to advocate for all the people of the Delta.”

The new Ijaw-Itsekiri communications were considered so significant that a Nigerian national newspaper carried the headline, “Americans Break Wall of Jericho.” Itsekiri tribal leaders have invited GCJ back next year to do a follow-on project in one of their villages. The GCJ trip also garnered the interest, support and presence of Nigerian government officials, some of whom had never been to the Delta. Chevron, too, met with the delegates and made a major financial contribution to the project. The Boeing International Corporation, Ghana, also made a major donation.

In addition to the impact in the Delta, the trip was transformative for the participants. From some of the Nigerian delegates:

“The recent work of GCJ in Nigeria came as a ray of hope that all is not yet lost, that we as Nigerians can work together as a team despite our differences to take our country and even the world to the top.”

“This programme gives me hope and courage. It also energises and challenges me as a Nigerian to wake up from slumber and do something useful for the development of my community. I shifted from reactive to proactive—to what can I do for my community instead of what can my community do for me.”

“The program has not only made me a better citizen of my country, Nigeria, but a better world citizen. I am now optimistic that any communal conflict anywhere in the world (the Niger Delta conflict inclusive) can best be resolved through teambuilding and compassionate listening.”

The U.S. and Nigerian delegates worked on the library together with community members in Oporoza, staying with host families and experiencing village life. They were welcomed enthusiastically and honored with music and dance. They also stopped in Lagos, Badagry, Benin City and Warri, visiting cultural sites and meeting with tribal leaders, U.S. consulate officials including the Ambassador, and oil executives. U.S. Consul General Brian Browne flew to Warri to join the GCJ town meeting with a diverse cross-section of Niger Delta stakeholders, where former enemies sat knee-to-knee in dialogue about how to build the future they want.

Future GCJ destinations include Ghana in October, 2006 and Burundi in 2007. More information can be found at www.globalcitizenjourney.org.

The public is invited to a presentation about GCJ’s Niger Delta trip, continuing work in Nigeria and future journeys on April 4th, 2006, from 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm at Safeco Jackson Center, 306 23rd Avenue South in Seattle. For more information, contact Susan Partnow 206.789.8697.

Global Citizen Journey, www.globalcitizenjourney.org, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to building cross-cultural understanding and global connectedness by bringing people of diverse cultures together to work on community projects, develop leadership skills and create sustainable communication networks. GCJ evolved from international grassroots efforts including The Compassionate Listening Project, its fiscal sponsor.

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