

Development for the people, by the people: Discovering PROLINNOVA in Senegal

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Before I participated in the PROLINNOVA International Partners Workshop (IPW) in Thiès, Senegal in May 2016, I had never had first-hand experience with development work. Even though my major at the University of Virginia is in Global Development Studies, I believe this lack of practical experience is fairly typical for most American university students, including those in my development-focused program. As a result, my main exposure to development work was the kind of large-scale, top-down development aid carried out between governments. I knew from my studies at the University of Virginia that this style of development was ineffective, but I also had no idea how grassroots bottom-up development worked in practice. In theory it struck me as a better option, but in practice it seemed dauntingly complicated to undertake.

My time with PROLINNOVA changed this. As a university student, the chance to work with a single small-scale development initiative in a developing country would be a big opportunity. But the chance to be immersed in the workings of an international development network that brings together grassroots development organizations across Africa, Asia, and Europe? A rare and incredible opportunity. This was a particularly important IPW as the network was working on its strategy for the period 2016-2020. My fellow students and I took notes on three intense days of discussions on how to transition PROLINNOVA's leadership from the Global North to the Global South. We helped with French-English translation between Francophone African participants and Anglophone participants, gaining an appreciation for the difficulty and yet the importance of multilingual communication in development work.

After the end of the three-day IPW, we spent four days visiting local project sites with the help of PROLINNOVA- Senegal's host organisation, Agrécol Afrique. Our time at the IPW helped us form the theoretical base we needed to understand the administrative planning of grassroots agricultural development, and our site visits allowed us to see that this kind of development really does work in practice. Better than just working, it allows the participating farmers and community members to become autonomous within just a few years of the project's debut, and then to be the actors of their own development and spread their new innovations to surrounding communities.

In our visit to the collective community farm of Ngueme, our guide Véro from Agrécol Afrique, explained to us that the project was helping to prevent rural exodus. One farmer in Ngueme says he had to travel to the capital city of Dakar for work before the start of the community farm project. In Dakar, he could not even pay his own expenses and he was getting into debt. Now, thanks to the community farm, he is self-sufficient and can remain at home with his family. This is Agrécol's

goal: not to give money to communities in need, but to teach them how to make money for themselves. Agrécol teaches men how to fish instead of giving them fish.



Ngueme Community Farm

Good university professors can teach their students about the advantages of farmer-led grassroots innovation in development, but only a hands-on experience like my time at the PROLINNOVA IPW in Senegal can really show students how effective and beneficial this kind of development is in reality. Thanks to the generous welcome of me and my fellow University of Virginia students by PROLINNOVA's network members, I am no longer just someone who knows about grassroots development methods; I have become an advocate for these methods, and I hope to incorporate them into my work in the development field in the years to come.