

► **DirectTalk** MUSINGS FROM THE 10TH FLOOR

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Reflections on Community

The dusty road that led to what seemed like the end of the world came to an abrupt stop in a remote community anchored in a dry and harsh environment. It was there that I learned a powerful life lesson about poverty, hope, and responsibility.

The water, sanitation, and hygiene project I was assigned to aimed to strike a different course. Like many development projects in the region, we were charged to reduce maternal and child mortality through improved nutrition, maternal empowerment, and enhanced environmental practices. Unlike other projects in the region, we were instructed to “not give any stuff away.” We were not to distribute pyrethroid impregnated mosquito nets, energy efficient cookstoves, or anything else for that matter. The community, if they desired greater health, would need to pay. The approach sounded harsh to me as the beneficiaries seemed to be subsistence farmers.

The foundational wisdom of ensuring community buy in became evident soon enough. Dependency in any form often leads to abuse and can be rife with greed. We learned that many well-intentioned aid organizations created expectations among their recipients that proved too generous. In some cases, communities would withhold support to engage in projects until gifts of building supplies, vehicles, or cash were secured.

On the other hand, our project required community in-kind support, not of cash but of labor, simple meals, or bags of cement. Every family donated something in support of drinking water, ventilated improved pit latrines, and kitchen gardens. As time moved

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on, community members took turns to police their new well from vandals who evidently coveted the iron pump handle. A fence was constructed from thorny vegetation to keep grazing animals away. Our community owned their improvements and were proud of what they had accomplished.

As I reflect on my halcyon days jetting around the planet to do good works, Kenya is a potent reminder that most sustainable solutions to society's ills are crafted and muscled into existence through local resources, human or otherwise. I am pleased to report that a community effort in support of environmental health and our profession exists in the U.S.: the National Environmental Health Partnership Council (NEHPC). NEHPC strives to support healthy people by working for healthier environments. It brings together diverse stakeholders to help expand and sustain awareness, education, policies, and practices related to environmental health.

NEHPC is hosted by the American Public Health Association and has a constituency made up of approximately two dozen environmental and public health organizations. Yours truly is a cochair, along with the dynamic Laura Anderko, PhD, RN, Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments. NEHPC is a group where the environmental health community in all its various facets—environmental justice, children's issues, laboratories, health departments—and NEHA come together to build our own version of a community garden. The harvest has begun with two products that you should be aware of and should use in your advocacy work.

The first product is the *Environmental Health Playbook: Investing in a Robust Environmental Health System*, which was published in 2017. The *Playbook* identifies opportunities for federal, state, local, and tribal governments to adopt standard approaches that ensure environmental health equity, protections, and access for all, particularly vulnerable and at-risk populations. I believe you will find the *Playbook* to be a useful resource. It lays out a vision for healthier communities through effective environmental health practice, as illustrated by case studies. The development of a well-trained and highly skilled workforce is one of the priorities laid out in the *Playbook*. You can download the *Playbook* at www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/topics/environment/eh_playbook.ashx.

NEHPC has also recently produced a report, *The Value of Environmental Health Services: Exploring the Evidence*, that attempts to answer the age-old question about the return on invest-

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ment for our services. Food, water, housing, climate, and select heavy metals receive attention in this very approachable and readable document, which can assist in answering the question about the value of our profession. While there is much more to do, the report represents a foundational step forward in efforts to answer the “so what” question. You can find the report in its entirety, a summary of almost 80 peer-reviewed articles, at www.apha.org/~media/files/pdf/topics/environment/eh_values.ashx.

Each NEHPC member contributes what they can as almost none of us have funding to donate to the cause. We have joined together to deliver webinars, host panel sessions at conferences, and exchange ideas. We also have water and communications workgroups that are struggling with how best to tackle recalcitrant issues at the national level. We ask ourselves the question, “What can we do together that we can’t do alone?” Like any community effort, groups and individuals migrate in and out over time, but ours is



Members of the National Environmental Health Partnership Council convene for a group photo outside the American Public Health Association (APHA) offices in Washington, DC. Photo courtesy of Olubukolami “Mimi” Musa, APHA.

a stable collective of like-minded professionals who aim to make our nation healthy and productive. All two dozen organizations give a little so we can collectively achieve a lot.

In his annual message to Congress in 1862, President Abraham Lincoln noted, “The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.” Our stormy present demands that we think and act anew. Our communities, like our life partners, demand our attention. As 2017 increasingly becomes a memory, we owe our constituents

the promise of a better 2018 by working with organizations that share a common vision and purpose. NEHPC is the group where that happens, and NEHA is pleased to be a part of the larger environmental health family, which manifests itself across many places and faces.

You can learn more about NEHPC at www.apha.org/topics-and-issues/environmental-health/partners/national-environmental-health-partnership-council. 🐼

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