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A GROUP OF U.S. ARTISTS IS SOLICITING THE HELP OF PEOPLE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES, LIKE HERE IN GHANA, TO SOLVE PROBLEMS OF THE DEVELOPED WORLD.

How to fix everything

If you've got a problem, Ghana ThinkTank can help. Staffers will seek advice from residents of poor countries. Inappropriate? Sometimes. Impractical? Check. Unusual? Sure. BY JAN STOJASPAL

THOUGH SHE LIVES IN A MOROCCAN village constructed of mud brick, Fatima Aytlkadi has plenty to say about why Americans are growing estranged from their parents. Seated on colorful pillows in the library of a Dar al-Ma'mûn art center, the 46-year-old mother of four says the problem starts with parents putting their young children into separate rooms. They may believe it enhances their well-being, but what it really does is

prevent proper bonding, she says. In Morocco, babies are always with the mother and they remain close by as they grow into adulthood. As a result, they are more likely to be there for their parents when they need help.

But that's not all, Aytlkadi continues as a dozen or so other women in the room, most of them half her age, nod in agreement. The problem is also that housing in the U.S. stresses privacy over community—houses face roads rather than each other and apartments lead out onto long, empty hallways. In Aytlkadi's village of Tassoulante, in central Morocco, houses open onto shared courtyards, which means neighbors see each other all the time and become almost like a family.

For more than six years, a group of scrappy U.S. artists calling themselves Ghana ThinkTank have been canvassing remote corners of the developing world—Morocco has been their latest stop—for deliciously counterintuitive solutions to all-too-common problems of the developed world. Since its inception, Ghana ThinkTank has tackled problems small and big, from dealing with a dog terrorizing a U.S. neighborhood with constant barking to a bitter ethnic divide that continues to tear apart the town of Mitrovica, north Kosovo, 14 years after the 1999 war destroyed what was left of Yugoslavia.

(In case you want to know: They suggested giving the dog a loving name like, well, "Love." A couple of months later, the dog's owner reported she could no longer hate her dog if she was screaming the word "love" at him. She started to spend more time with him, and the dog relaxed. In Kosovo, they encouraged the town's Serbs and Albanians to suggest solutions to problems afflicting both communities.)

Even when the suggestions turned out to be impractical or plain inappropriate—like combating homelessness and obesity by having homeless people dress in fat suits and perform social theater for the obese—they have proven their value in their ability to break down cultural stereotypes and by enhancing understanding among cultures, which is Ghana ThinkTank's ultimate goal.

The project actually started out as "a bit of a prank," says cofounder Christopher Robbins, a 40-year-old teacher of sculpture and art for social change in New York. He adds that it was "an effort to give Americans a taste of their own medicine by highlighting both the arrogance and impracticality of many of the solutions they have been trying

to impose on the developing world.”

That’s more than a political statement. Robbins’ wake-up came when he worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Benin, West Africa. He told the residents of the village of Toucountouna to eat dried mangoes during a famine season and showed them how to build a mango dryer. Yet, they wouldn’t touch the dried fruit. “I realized that the people working with me were mostly doing it just because it was interesting to be working with a strange white guy, not because

they thought it was a good idea,” he says.

While the Ghana ThinkTank may have started out as a prank, it is no joke. In 2011, its work was recognized by the U.S. State Department’s Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs when it was chosen as one of 15 American artists or collaborative artist teams to travel to 15 countries and engage in people-to-people diplomacy through the visual arts. Last year, Ghana ThinkTank received a major grant from Creative Capital to spark collaboration between immigrants

and anti-immigrant groups living along the U.S.-Mexico border. The organization has collaborators in Ghana, Cuba, El Salvador, Serbia, Afghanistan, Iran and Mexico.

Also, its ability to engage communities and come up with highly innovative solutions has become an inspiration to both professionals and activists. “At Wolff Olins, we believe in being game-changing and innovative, but we also believe that often the simplest solution is the best one,” says Kate Nielsen, director of the brand’s consulting firm, who invited Robbins to speak at one of the company’s weekly meetings in early 2012. “What I liked about the solutions the think tank came up with is that they were often really simple and straightforward—things that anyone should think of but we don’t because we are so immersed in our own society.”

Because Ghana ThinkTank makes it its mission not only to ask for suggestions but to implement them and show the result to the person who provided the suggestion, staffers enlisted the help of Jason Sargenti, an architect, to redesign Penn South, an apartment complex in Chelsea, Manhattan, in line with Aytlkadi’s recommendations.

This redesign is intended to promote a sense of community. It features garden plots that are given to pairs of people from different generations who agree to tend them together and comes with communal green spaces between buildings. But the architect took the concept further and turned the apartment buildings inside out so that windows would face each other and overlook a shared courtyard. The apartment complex hasn’t been completed yet. “But I can see how this could create a sense of community,” Robbins says. Aytlkadi has yet to see the proposed changes.

Those who saw footage of Ghana ThinkTank executing some of the smaller solutions responded with enthusiasm. Adil, the guy who drove the customized donkey cart carrying the solar-powered video booth that Ghana ThinkTank used in Morocco to record suggestions, sums it up as follows: “When one is trying to please his nose, he chooses a nice fragrance; for ears, good music; and for the tongue, something sweet. But for the heart? Well, this fills my heart.” ■

JAN STOJASPAL, a freelance journalist based in Prague, the Czech Republic, now knows that solutions can come from some very unexpected places.

So you think you’ve got a problem?

Solutions from Ghana ThinkTanks’ collaborators.

PROBLEM: Widening generation gap in Wales

SOLUTION FROM IRAN: Collect funny, dirty memories from the elderly, record them and play them to younger people to show that when old people were young, they weren’t that different from today’s generation.



PROBLEM: Lack of ethnic diversity in a wealthy Westport, Connecticut, neighborhood

SOLUTION FROM EL SALVADOR: Hire immigrant laborers to attend an elite social function to show that the community is diverse if one counts those who maintained its lawns and houses.

PROBLEM: Rivalry between two universities

SOLUTION FROM CUBA: After Ghana ThinkTank workers identified the rivalry as a class issue, a game of street chess let members of both groups excel on a level playing field.

PROBLEM: Scowling and grumpy people on the streets of Cardiff, Wales

SOLUTION FROM IRAN: Make scowling people wear T-shirts bearing their own smiling faces.

PROBLEM: The flat and uninspiring landscape of Karlsruhe, Germany

SOLUTION FROM MEXICO: Hire parkour practitioners to highlight the city’s verticality by way of their skilled movement through an urban landscape.

PROBLEM: Uneven sidewalks making walking in high heels difficult

SOLUTION FROM SERBIA: Create a flat high-heel-only lane.

SOLUTION FROM IRAN: Put up “Do not wear high heels on this sidewalk” signs.

PROBLEM: Living in a society in which it is not a problem not to care about people

SOLUTION FROM MOROCCO: Ignoring people and being rude is a problem of privilege. If we feel we have everything, we don’t need to care. The solution is to get in touch with one’s needs, thereby learning how to care about the needs of others. | J.S.