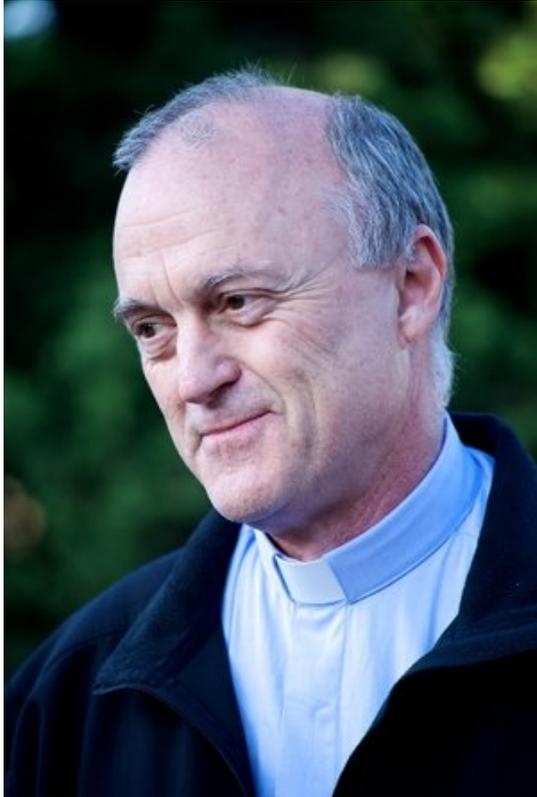


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EDUCATION - Washington DC, 21 November 2016 – Fr. David Holdcroft S.J. believes an education is among the most practical gifts JRS can offer.

Under his six-year watch as regional director of Jesuit Refugee Service Southern Africa, he and his staff developed and implemented vocational and post-secondary educational programs that offered both inspiration and tangible benefits to the refugees they served. Programs were developed not only to hone skills needed to land a job but also to help sustain a business and livelihood not solely dependent on outside assistance.

“The whole idea is that (refugees are) accompanied through all of this,” he said. “There’s an incubation time where their idea can grow and be critiqued and rubbed up against different things and people, and hopefully by the time they start a business there will be a bit of maturity and the ability for the business to sustain.”

Fr. Holdcroft, who ended his tenure at his South Africa-based post in September, will take on a new role in Rome in 2017, leading tertiary education programs for JRS worldwide. The Australia native discussed his past successes, near misses and future ambitions during a recent visit to the JRS/USA office in Washington, D.C.

Question: Tell us a little bit about what you've been doing in Southern Africa these past few years with Jesuit Refugee Service?

Fr. David Holdcroft: I was regional director of Southern Africa for JRS for six years. Coming in to a new job you assess what is going on, and we set ourselves a number of strategic objectives – some of which we probably attained, some of which we didn't and most of which we attained half-way. These included, certainly, to review our programming and try to raise the quality of it, to get a regional strategy, and to really develop JRS as an international organization and not just as a collective of local organizations, with the hope that we could really leverage our shared expertise around the region in a manner that we can move the work ahead.

So instead of somebody doing a particular kind of project, raising chickens or something in Zimbabwe and nobody else knowing about it, we were really trying to cross-fertilize those experiences. So our regional office's mission was to lead, guide and manage the region. It seems simple but when you're working with about 300 staff in four different jurisdictions in very very different situations – two in urban (environments) two in camps – it takes some doing...

Early on we made the move from (focusing) just on pure emergency (work) into development (work), because southern Africa was fairly unique in that it wasn't generating refugees itself – it was (instead) receiving forced migrants from elsewhere in Africa. So because of that I think we realized that the only way to attract funding was to have pretty unitive and quality programs. So that's been the story, and we're working very hard at that. For the most part we've been successful, but there's still enough to give the next guy plenty to do.

Q: Tell us a little bit about programming, particularly educational programming, in the region?

FH: I think probably the program that I'm the happiest with was in Zimbabwe where we got some seed funding from two different funders to try out a vocational skills/livelihood program in

a smallish camp (Tongogara) in a very isolated region, a very impoverished region of Zimbabwe... For part of this program, we linked vocational skills with income generation. We didn't have a certificate as an outcome. We actually said, no, these people are going to be earning money at the end of it.

And just that switch in mindset put us on a very different trajectory where we had to ask the question, what prevents people from making money, particularly if they've had skills training, how much income do people need and what do we want to see from these refugees in the long term? We also asked, what kind of skills do we want to be giving them that they can earn an income from? Because if everybody does hairdressing then we're setting them up to fail. Then we would ask them what sort of business would you like to be running? And then we'd match that with the market assessment and say, what special qualities can you bring? And more often than not, that discussion would lead to an alteration in what that person wanted to do...

They also do courses in what's sort of like conflict resolution, and working in cross-cultures and stuff like that, with the aim that we don't have enough capital to give everyone a business but if they go into a group we can give enough start-up capital. So they had to learn to work in a group, work with people, resolve conflicts, work across ethnic lines, work across conflict lines in some cases, and then get themselves into an organization and allow that organization to decide how to invest the profit. And in the end we've got a person who we think is business prepared.

Q: Is this program something that can be replicated at other camps?

FH: I think so, and also in urban areas. I think it depends a lot on the team and the people on the ground. If the people on the ground have a vested interest in not making it happen, like they fear competition from refugees, then there is nothing that I can do or say that will make that program be successful; it will be undermined from within. And I think we have some experience of that, unfortunately.

Q: So you're heading to Rome. Tell me about your new position?

FH: It's really conducting a strategic review of the JRS tertiary education projects (worldwide). We have about a dozen of those, not counting vocational skills training as tertiary. The tertiary work we do is sort of a mix of liberal arts, as defined in the American system, and sort of more

practical, six-month courses, what we call community service planning tracks. We have some issues facing it, notwithstanding a lot of enthusiasm around it. A lot of funders are saying “we’re not getting a lot of bang for our buck” and they would rather see us launching a much more vocational, income-generating style courses...

But we know from research and all the rest of it that these tertiary courses are valuable. These projects have all been partnered with JC:HEM, this organization that is now called Jesuit Worldwide Learning. We need, as JRS, to know more what we want out of it. Because when you’re dealing with a tertiary institution, it doesn’t worry necessarily what happens to students afterward – it’s main thing is delivery. And so we’ve got to get a bit more outcome-orientation into it. And with that, I’m hoping we get a bit more stable funding.

Q: Providing tertiary education certainly is a challenge in the refugee communities. Just a small percentage of young adults and adults in refugee communities have access to any tertiary education program. What do you see as the one or two things that must be tackled first before these programs can really take off?

FH: Last year there were 65 million people in refugee or refugee-like situations around the world. That’s a sizable portion of humanity. And of those, 107,000 in 2015 were resettled to a third country. Now that sort of percentage – less than 1 percent – obviously is not representing a way forward. And you and I know that governments reacting to popular sentiment are tending to say less and less (about refugee resettlement), even though the U.S. has just increased their quota again. There is sort of a resistance to it. But if we leave these people to rot, no matter where they are, then that’s where you have your future ISILs, your future al Qaedas, all this kind of stuff. And we know that. So one of the major ways out of this is to make sure these people are educated and educated well so they can analyze the situation they’re in and they can learn how to read the world. And I think these are actually critical issues, and I think they are going to become more critical as people stay in the region they’re in...

When you look at the last 100 years and into the IT revolution, harnessing electricity and all this kind of stuff, the changes have been incredible. But if you look at it another way, the human problems are the same as they were 100 years ago, and as they were 2,000 years ago. In some ways, things seem not to have changed all that much. And one of those things is, do we just define our society and home by what we exclude and who we exclude, or by our ability to be hospitable and bring those people in? And there is the solution to a lot of the world’s conflicts, ultimately. The other way will just lead to conflict, wars, etc. etc. It sounds very idealistic, and I have absolutely no illusion as to how difficult it is... And JRS has to work as an international organization, not as a group of national organizations. And I really really trust and

hope that it can rise to that challenge.

Q: To play devil's advocate, what would you say to critics who argue that JRS should concentrate on primary and secondary education for refugees and forget tertiary education, that it's just too hard, too cumbersome, and the return isn't good enough.

FH: I don't think it's an either-or situation. If you don't finish matriculation you are going to be far less resilient in your working life. When the inevitable shocks and layoffs and all the rest of it come, you're going to be much slower and much less able to recover, and that eventually becomes a waist of a talent. So we know that if you take that step into tertiary (education) or into something that is post-secondary, then you're going to be more resilient... Yes, we need primary, we need secondary, and we also need tertiary" education programs.

Source: en.jrs.net/