

Local Knowledge

I attended a presentation on a university's work in underdeveloped countries. The presenter, Dr. Mark Milstein, told this story about a water system in Africa:

A group of engineers at the university were funded to work on a problem with a rural water system in Africa. They were given the parameters of the problem: While there was an infrastructure of pipes and wells, there was insufficient water. Could they design a better pumping system that would increase the supply of water?

They toiled for months on the design of a pumping system and produced an excellent solution, which they built and took with them on their first trip to the rural site of the problem water system. When they visited the villagers who were connected to the water system, they found that all of their water taps were running all of the time, depleting the water supply so that there was not enough to go around. Why were their taps running? "The washers that let the taps turn off are worn out. We can't obtain replacement washers from any local source," they were told. The solution to the problem was to bring rubber washers to the villagers!

The point of the story is not that solutions to problems are always so simple, but that there is no substitute for interaction with the people who have local knowledge.

From Chapter 7 of
Get Out of the Way!
How to Manage Development
of Timely, Innovative, and Relevant Products
by John V. Levy, Ph.D.