The Politics of "Corporate Social Responsibility" in Equatorial Guinea

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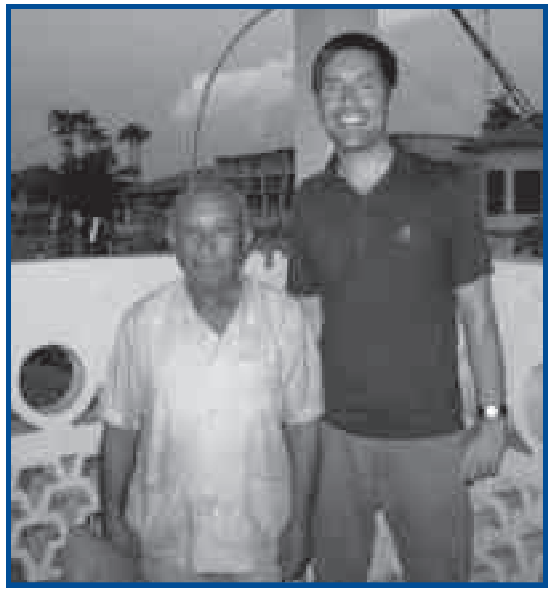

My research in Equatorial Guinea focuses on an increasingly popular type of international development: public-private partnerships between multinational corporations and host governments. Equatorial Guinea, the 3rd largest producer of oil in Sub-Saharan Africa, provides an interesting context to study the joint efforts of governments and businesses to eradicate poverty. Before the discovery of oil 15 years ago, Equatorial Guinea was one of the poorest countries in the world; today, average per capita income is more than $10,000. The government's ability to translate this wealth into societal improvements, however, has been marred by corruption and ineffective government institutions, and the government's provision of basic social services like health and education lags far behind most other African countries.

Multinational oil companies are attempting to bridge the gap in social services while simultaneously working to increase the government's ability to provide social services in the near future. With this in mind, oil companies have initiated social development (officially known as Corporate Social Responsibility – or "CSR") projects that seek to improve the country's health and education programs. One set of oil companies is working with several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to decrease the infection rates of malaria, while another oil company is working with the government to overhaul the national education system.

A summer research trip to Equatorial Guinea allowed numerous insights into the promises and challenges of these types of public-private development partnerships. Interviews with oil company representatives revealed that the companies, accustomed to efficiency and a results-oriented focus, are sometimes frustrated by lackluster government involvement with and support for the projects. At the same time, however, several interviewees expressed optimism that government capacity will increase incrementally, albeit slowly and non-linearly, and stressed the companies' commitment to ensuring government involvement.

Despite the early frustrations and growing pains associated with these projects, real improvements are already noticeable. Interviews with oil company and NGO representatives revealed that in just four years the anti-malaria project has managed to decrease the incidence of malaria in children by 26%. On the education front, in the past two years more than 1000 teachers have been trained and, by the end of next year, 40 schools will be refurbished.

Thus, there is hope that partnerships between the public and private sectors can lead to sustainable development outcomes that improve the wellbeing of some of the world's most impoverished people. Such optimism, however, must be tethered by a healthy dose of caution. Given their nascent nature, very few empirical studies have analyzed the outcomes of public-private development partnerships. I will be returning to Equatorial Guinea to build on the research enabled by the Center for African Studies, to more closely analyze the projects and assess whether they can, in fact, lead to the improvements in government capacity necessary to make these projects sustainable in the long-term.

Joseph Kraus is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Political Science. His pre-dissertation research in Equatorial Guinea was made possible with help from a CAS summer pre-dissertation travel award and a Department of Political Science summer travel award.