**WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT THE COOKS?**

This year, meals needed to be served on time—a repeat of last year’s situation was *not* an option. Mary needed to fix logistics for the second annual Girls’ Empowerment Camp in central Senegal. Although Mary had been part of the planning for both camps, she had never been a project leader until Lindsay left the Peace Corps (PC), an American non-governmental organization (NGO). Mary inherited a messy situation. Lindsay had signed the food preparation agreement with the same establishment used for the first camp. This left the second camp vulnerable to the same women who persistently served meals late, refused to follow directions, and willfully misinterpreted expectations. Sleep eluded Mary. Her thoughts returned time and again to the questions: Could she work with the same, difficult women? What shall we do about the cooks?

**Peace Corps in Senegal**

Central Senegal, home of the PC Girls’ Empowerment Camp, is located in Africa’s arid Sahal ecosystem. Here, PC serves Serers, a proud people with their own language. Serers comprise the third largest ethnic group (15%) in this predominantly Muslim nation (CIA, 2013). Like most Senegalese, Serers are friendly and hospitable. Visitors to Senegal are advised to create social relationships before trying to do business (World Trade Press, 2010). There is a strong sense of proportionate sharing, especially at meals, which arises in turn from strong sense of in-group inclusiveness that creates a strong social safety net. This collectivist tendency, along with pronounced traditional and fatalistic attitudes, often results in a lackadaisical approach to work that is troubling to Westerners (Noorderhaven & Tidjani, 2001). PC workers note that a common response to a question of intent or request to do something is *Insha’Allah* or “God willing.” Senegalese tend to simply accept what happens, and usually will not take pains to exert effort in order to get tasks done. Life in Senegal flows at a very leisurely pace.

PC had worked in Senegal for more than 50 years. A major NGO in Senegal, PC oversaw wide-ranging development projects related to business, agriculture, health, and education. PC garnered good will from the Senegalese because of the PC commitment to integrate its workforce into communities and honor local culture to better infuse PC projects with the real and perceived needs of the people it served. PC prepared its employees for cross-cultural experiences before leaving the U.S., and provided intensive language training once its employees reached Senegal.

Mary learned a great deal about Senegal before leaving for the small, West African country that lies along the North Atlantic Ocean. She discovered in *The World Factbook* (CIA, 2013) that Senegal is home to 13 million people and is geographically the size of South Dakota. Most Senegalese live in poverty and rely on subsistence farming. Access to electricity and clean water is unreliable for the urban population and nonexistent for much of the rural population. Senegal relies heavily on foreign aid and foreign investment (World Trade Press, 2010). Many children, especially girls, do not attend school beyond middle school (UNESCO, 2012).

Fluency in French, Senegal’s official language, was one reason Mary had been chosen for her assignment. A French colony until 1960, vestiges of the colonial period remain in Senegal’s government institutions. Upon arrival, Mary studied Wolof, the language of the largest ethnic group. Unfortunately, she was sent to central Senegal where Serer is the predominant language.

PC workers enjoyed wide latitude in defining and executing their projects because of PC’s strong record of creativity, integration, and cultural sensitivity. The PC Girls’ Empowerment Camp was one such project. PC had run successful youth camps in southeastern Senegal for several years. The popularity of these initiatives led PC to establish camps in other regions. PC workers in central Senegal organized a camp to empower teenage girls by teaching life skills that would help them reach full potential in adulthood.

**Preparations for the First Girls’ Empowerment Camp**

PC selected a *campement* (a hotel-like establishment with free-standing rooms and facilities) in Badoudou, 30 miles (a day’s travel) from the large regional capital and six miles (one hour by horse cart) from the nearest town. Located on a river, Badoudou’s layout was conducive to running summer camp activities and was a low-cost venue. Two months prior to the camp, Lindsay Marks, the PC project lead, and Mary, a member of Lindsay’s team, met with the campement manager, Robert Bassiné, to finalize the details of the facilities and services he would provide for the camp. Badoudou typically served wealthy European tourists, so its normal price for three meals per day was far beyond that which PC could afford. Lindsay and Mary negotiated a deal that allowed PC to rent the kitchen, provide all the food, and hire cooks. This cheaper option also gave PC more control over the menu for campers and counselors. Based on Robert’s advice, Mary was to purchase the food and store it at PC. Robert cautioned Mary to provide only the food supplies needed for each meal, lest the cooks prepare significantly more food than needed in order to take leftovers home to their families.

PC agreed to hire five, middle-aged, Serer women who worked as cooks for the campement on an as-needed basis based on Robert’s recommendation and his willingness to make the arrangements. The women lived in a nearby Serer village three-quarters of a mile from the campement, so they were able to walk to work during the day and return home at night to care for their families. Typical for the region, these women had married at a young age, had large families, and actively resisted changes to traditional roles. For these wives of subsistence farmers, cooking wages provided much-needed extra income of 2000 CFA ($4) per day.

**Problems during the First Girls’ Empowerment Camp**

Mary oversaw food preparation for the camp. Mary, who spoke French and limited Wolof, met the cooks when they arrived on the first afternoon of camp. Khady, the head cook, who spoke fluent French as well as Serer and Wolof, had attended elementary school, trained as a mid-wife, and worked as a nurse in her village. Rose, Fatou, Diarra, and Mame spoke fluent Serer and Wolof, but had limited facility in French because each had attended school for fewer than three years. As a consequence of the language barrier, Mary gave her instructions to Khady, who relayed them to the other cooks.

The problems began after dinner the first evening. Meals in Senegal are eaten from communal bowls. Mary had instructed the cooks to prepare eight bowls for five people each, enough to serve the campers and counselors. After setting out the eight bowls, Rose asked Mary and Lindsay, “Where is *our* dinner?” Robert intervened, and after a heated discussion, Lindsay and Mary realized that they would have to provide food for the cooks in addition to pay. But for that night, they told the cooks they would have to wait until after the girls had eaten, knowing there would be leftovers.

Tension grew. After breakfast the next morning, Mary took the lunch ingredients to the kitchen and told the cooks that lunch should be served at 1:30. They agreed and said they had everything they needed. Mary returned at 1:00 to find Khady and Mame stirring the rice and the other three outside talking with Robert’s assistant. Mame announced without explanation that lunch would not be ready until 2:00. The entire camp schedule was disrupted. Although Mary spent increasing amounts of time in the kitchen, all subsequent meals were an hour or two late.

Mary’s relationship with the cooks worsened. The cooks continued to work at a leisurely pace. In fact, there was never an instance where all five women were working at the same time. Once, Khady refused to prepare a typical regional meal on the pretense that it was difficult. Another time, Mary found the cooks leaving large amounts of mango on the pits as they sliced them for a snack. It was clear to Mary that the cooks wanted to keep more of the mangos for themselves.

At the end of camp, the cooks demanded they be given unused food left in the kitchen. Not wanting the bother of packing up everything, Lindsay and Mary allowed the cooks to take some of it. However, out of sheer exasperation, the PC leaders withheld some of the remaining supplies, knowing full well they were depriving the cooks’ families of much needed food.

**Preparing for the Second Girls’ Empowerment Camp**

The first Girls’ Empowerment Camp was well-received, so PC wanted to double the number of girls served in the second year. By this time, Mary had taken over as project leader. While the Badoudou setting was well situated, the food service had been highly problematic. Mary knew she would have to work with the same cooks. The idea of getting new cooks from a different town proved impractical, since lodging would then have to be provided as well. Besides, there was no guarantee of better service because most of the issues were cultural. Mary and her new team needed to avoid the prior year’s problems. Filled with dread, Mary needed a plan—now.

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