

Helping re-build Somalia

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Somalia is a country that has been ravaged with the long civil war after the fall of Sayed Barre in 1991. However, the modern Somalia consists of three regions, the unstable Southern part of Somalia, the Punt land sandwiched between the two region right at the sharp horn of Africa and the northern part of Somalia bordering northern Ethiopia and Eastern Djibouti called the republic of Somaliland.

The republic of Somaliland is autonomous and more stable as it has its own government, though not officially recognized by the UN and the Africa Union because of its autonomy from the southern Somali Transition federal government. Therefore Somaliland deals with the international community through a number of non-government organizations working inside the country with most of their headquarters based abroad or in Nairobi, Kenya.

Sheikh technical veterinary school is an initiative of an Italian NGO called Terra Nuova Eastern Africa through a European Union funding. With its offices in Nairobi, most of the administrative duties are therefore carried out through Nairobi.

Sheikh technical veterinary school (STVS, website: <http://stvs-edu.org>) is located in a Northern town of Sheikh 239 Km North West of Hargeisa, the capital city of Somaliland.

The school currently offers 3 years diploma courses in veterinary sciences and food science. At the same time, the school has established within it the Centre for pastoral development (CEPAD) a reference centre with research laboratories anchored within the school to stimulate research into curbing livestock trade related diseases. The centre aims at establishing laboratories for training the diploma students; performing research in the areas of trade associated livestock diseases and will also serves as a reference centre in the horn of Africa. The building of one of the laboratories is completed (As can be seen in the website <http://stvs-edu.org>; the second building that is going to anchor food hygiene lab is completed and yet to be equipped. My role in the school is to help develop research portfolio with the centre and at the same time giving tutorials in the areas of biochemistry and pharmacology.

The challenges:

Arriving in Hargeisa, Somaliland aboard the EC flights, my spirits were indeed low because I knew I had made a very wrong decision in my life to take up that position. I thought my Ph D in Molecular Biology was not going to apply much and that maybe I will never exercise it. But as we travelled the 239 km to Sheikh town sandwiched between two Somaliland military officers, in a 4X4 Toyota land cruiser I came across a calm country, with fresh air more fresh than Nairobi, which helped improved my spirits. But something that kept amusing me more was the armed military guards which made me look like a politician.

Professionally, my spirits were lifted when I arrived at STVS. I realized that the country needed my PhD more than the Kenyans need it.

On the research part I found out that those that have come to STVS before me had done their part, and done it well! I found one laboratory building doubling as the biochemistry research lab with the building already finished, but still needing more improvements in terms of research equipments. The laboratory is currently equipped with an ELISA spectrophotometer reader, a culture incubator and a small bench top centrifuge, which as at now limits the type of experiments and work we can do!

This is totally different from the experience I had at ILRI with well equipped laboratories. But this is what encouraged me to want to stay longer at STVS and put my expertise into practice and be able to move the lab ahead!

For now, one thing I am determined to do is to make sure that by the time I leave STVS, Sheikh, the students will be able to do their experiments to improve their practical skills and those who will come after me for research purposes will be able to do a cutting edge research in Somaliland!

Having been recently awarded with a young immunologist training/travel award by the International union of immunological societies (IUIS) and the American association of immunology (AAI) award. The award that recently took me to the University of minesota, I could have chosen to stay in America and not come back to Africa, but however, I find it fun working in Somaliland.
