

Economic Development and Capacity Building in Zanzibar, Tanzania

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I just finished the economic development adventure of a lifetime. Through the Enabling Growth Through Investment and Enterprise (ENGINE) program, implemented by ICMA, I spent six weeks in Zanzibar, Tanzania, helping the local chamber of commerce as it strives to partner with government to improve the business climate. Zanzibar is a series of islands located off the coast of Tanzania in the Indian Ocean. The islands have a population of 1.3 million, with most people located in the urban area in and around Stone Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Zanzibar has an interesting economic mix, from tourism, the dominant export sector, to agricultural products such as spices and seaweed, to many of the trade and service sectors needed to support an economy that is growing at 7% per year.



Many of the challenges between the government and private sector were familiar. There is a real will to start public private dialogues so that the two sides can communicate better. They share the common goal of building prosperity, and although challenging, the project was exciting. My primary effort was helping the chamber of commerce with capacity building, from

accessing practical online tools, to addressing the perennial issues of revenue generation and defining board (or council) roles versus staff responsibilities.

While the economy is growing, there are many issues to address, including infrastructure, education, taxation and regulation. The Republic of Zanzibar is a semi-autonomous part of the country of Tanzania, and the existence of two strong federal-type governments as well as local government agencies can result in a burdensome bureaucracy. However, there is an entrepreneurial spirit in Zanzibar and a tendency to form cooperative associations, which helps smaller industries find success.



I came to Tanzania at an interesting time. The people in the islands of Zanzibar are over 95 percent Muslim, and my trip encompassed almost all of Ramadan. From an economic standpoint, it was extremely interesting. Many office-type businesses close early to accommodate the pressures of fasting all day, however, the streets are brimming with people attending prayers, purchasing goods for the evening breaking of the fast, Iftar, and enjoying this month of celebration. Eid, which marks the end of the month of fasting is a time of family celebration, including gifts for children and a large festival in one of the public areas.

It is no wonder that tourism is the major industry on these Indian Ocean islands. The architecture of Stone Town, where I stayed, is a labyrinth of narrow, whitewashed alleyways and spectacularly carved large wooden doors. There are hidden parks full of palm trees and ocean views, and many open air, top floor restaurants with breathtaking sunset views. Beach resorts line the two major islands, and the diving and snorkeling is amazing. Tour options are wide ranging, I visited a spice farm, saw the endangered Red Colobus Monkey, and took a boat to a nearby island with giant tortoises and an immaculate beach.



It is great to be back in the US, where I will continue to work with local organizations and communities. Spending six weeks in Zanzibar working on an economic development project was a real growth opportunity. I enjoyed working in a

completely different culture and helping a local organization make positive change on the other side of the world.

