

Coady Institute has a new director

Gaventa eager to help citizens build communities

By PATRICIA BROOKS ARENBURG Staff Reporter | FIVE QUESTIONS

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The Coady International Institute at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish has named the chairman of Oxfam Great Britain as its new director.

John Gaventa, 61, who first visited the Coady International Institute for a conference in the '90s, has done extensive work with big international non-government organizations and those at the grassroots level.

Gaventa said Coady has an important role to play in leadership development at home and around the world.

Q: What drew you to the Coady International Institute and to St. F.X.?

A: What draws me to it is several things. One is it represents the kind of work of training citizens and building action and leadership for citizens solving their own problems in their own communities. That's always been important to me. Secondly, I think it's really at a very

exciting stage. When I visited Coady, I got this sense of an institution with a new building, a very strong staff, great commitment . . . that can and wants to play an exciting role in the world. The third thing is, because I work a lot internationally, I think that we need institutes like that in the international development work that I do, that really focus on building leadership from the community to solve their problems, and Coady just seemed like the best place to do that.

Q: What are some of the key priorities upon which you would like to focus as you lead Coady?

A: The last thing I want to do is come sweeping in from the outside and say 'OK folks, this is what we're going to do,' because it does have a long tradition and it's got an excellent staff and reputation.

So my first priority is really to listen and learn more about what it's already doing. It, secondly, is to continue to support that work. But the third thing is, much of my work has been around how citizens and community leaders can really help to strengthen democracies in their own countries, how they engage with governments to make them more responsive and less corrupt and more democratic.

From my experience, I think Coady can also play a role in helping to strengthen community leaders around the world who are trying to hold their governments more accountable and trying to make governments more responsive to their needs.

If you look around the globe now, I mean who would've imagined after so much money that's from foreign aid that's been flowing into places like Egypt to build democracies from above, it took the actions of ordinary citizens to really bring about huge change.

Q: When we look at North American society, for the people who may be caught up in the business of living and raising their families, going to school, how important is citizen engagement and how do you express to them the true importance of this?

A: It almost sounds trite, but citizen engagement is important when it's important. What I mean by that is I don't expect that ordinary people who are busy with their jobs and their families will be out there participating all the time. But when there's a real burning issue which they feel, then that's the time that they need to learn to exercise their voice and use their leadership to bring about action. And I think that Canada, of course, already has a lot going on in the area of deliberation and citizen engagement. But . . . some of the most exciting work in this field, examples we see . . . about how citizens engage, are actually occurring in other parts of the world. Another thing I always say is that in democracies like Canada, the U.S. and Britain, we can learn about citizen engagement in other places, because that's where so many of the new innovations, new examples are emerging.

Q: What are some of these new innovations?

A: For instance, the whole idea of participatory budgeting, that citizens can really get involved in how their budgets are developed and spent in their local community. That's emerged in Brazil and it's spreading all over the U.K. and parts of North America. Much of Coady's work has been about microcredit and that originally started in Bangladesh, but now it's also being used for community development across North America. Those are some of the ideas that I think Coady is in an ideal position not just to bring people from around the world to it . . . but also to bring their knowledge to Canada and see what communities in Canada can learn from them.

Q: How have things such as social networking and Internet connectivity affected citizen engagement?

A: We see lots of examples that are going on now. Many people are talking about what's happening in Egypt in the Middle East as really a Twitter and Facebook revolution. It has provided tools that people around the world, ordinary people, can share information and knowledge very, very quickly. It's also being used now in many parts of the world as a tool where people can really help watch corruption and keep governments accountable. In Kenya, for instance, small farmers who used to have to depend on middlemen can now simply text the market in the big city and find out what the going price is for their crops. And so they get information that allows them to not be cheated in the market.

There are so many uses now of some of the new technologies to help build and strengthen citizen engagement, but it won't be done by itself. It's not a quick fix, either. People still need to know how to use it, they need to feel a sense of empowerment to use it, they have to be able to share with others and learn from others, and that's my understanding of what many of the Coady programs do.

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