

The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Dec 12, 2009

Growing towgay and institutions

Singaporean started up Rwanda's Workforce Development Authority

SINGAPOREAN Chong Fook Yen, 37, is fruitful in planting institutions and towgay in remote Rwanda.

He is among a tiny band of spirited Singaporeans who build expertise in the country.

As the first director-general of Rwanda's Workforce Development Authority, he started up the agency to ramp up skills in the national workforce. This was vital as the genocide had destroyed precious intellectual assets - manpower.

Based in the capital Kigali for more than a year till April, he is now an adviser who flies in to fine-tune what he started.

He was contracted by the Singapore Cooperation Enterprise (SCE) to transfer expertise. This agency advises foreign nations wishing to replicate pieces of Singapore's popular development model.

For Mr Chong, a major project has been the speedy recruitment of a big team of 100 Rwandan trainers for 10 priority trades that power the economy.

Among the chosen sectors are hospitality, construction and infocomm technology.

Impressive hospitality skills, for instance, are valued by high-end tourists who will pay US\$500 (S\$695) to gaze at mountain gorillas in their lush habitat, or who delight in hidden volcanic lakes.

Mr Chong arranged for 90 of his instructors to visit Singapore for intensive training stints of seven weeks this year.

He sent another 10 to the Philippines to master fish and prawn farming.

Besides working to infuse the agency with a Singapore mindset of excellence, hard work, strategic thinking and passion, he has tried to create a bit of Singapore at the dinner table.

Grinning, he describes how he grows towgay - soak beans overnight, toss them in pet bottles, harvest in seven days.

The cheerful and driven single grew the first-ever kangkong in Rwanda from seeds. Once, he and his friends planted vegetables on a little concrete plot covered with trash bags and topped with soil.

His landlord was passionate about his flower garden and wanted it pristine, so that was why he improvised. The urban kangkong, sprouting bountifully, was stir-fried with hae bee, or dried shrimp.

'We had to find ways,' he says. 'Africa probably played a role in us being enterprising so we can survive as comfortably as we can.'

He is an Africa hand. He has worked in the African unit of the World Bank, which sent him on Mozambique missions.

More recently, he worked in Tanzania and Namibia with the SCE.

Rwanda was a pleasant surprise when he relocated there in December 2007. 'The streets are so clean. You don't see illegal hawkers and beggars, no one harasses you.'

It is very peaceful compared to African cities like Johannesburg and Nairobi. In Kigali, he walks safely late at night.

He also loves the mountains and the cool climate which makes it possible for strawberries to grow.

Once, he was driving when an eagle swooped down on its prey in front of his car. 'Like National Geographic,' he says.

Young Singaporeans should come to Africa, he urges. Rwanda's exceptional story of survival will inspire them.

'Rwanda has tried to organise itself as best as it can, with its scarce resources and a very young population,' he says.

'Singapore is a very small and comfortable country. But there's more to the world than Singapore.'

He wonders: 'What if one day we become refugees? Are we able to survive?'

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