

What happens when a revolution breaks out during your study

By Nolwenn Gontard

Editor's note: in October 2014 IPA's West Africa programs director woke up at 5AM to his cell phone ringing and a staffer reassuring him "the Parliament is on fire, but don't worry, everybody's fine, we're going to work from home today." In a blog post below, intern Nolwenn Gontard from our Burkina Faso office writes about what it's like when a revolution breaks out during your study.

The IPA Burkina Faso team has been through some hard moments in the past months. There is nothing tragic to report on our side, but this is not the case for all the Burkinabe families.

Every single member of the staff will always remember the Revolution that took President Blaise Compaoré down, culminating on Oct 30th when in a unique moment for West Africa, he resigned after 27 years in office. United in the memory of this moment, we lived through 10 days of uncertainty in very different ways. Some of our colleagues were proud to report during our weekly meeting that they took part of the protests that showed how peaceful this insurrection actually was. Some declared it was not such a good idea to rent a house really close to a large paved road - although they ended up in joining the Revolution too. Hearing that, some (not to name our country director) replied it was really an irresponsible, dangerous, foolish idea to expose themselves in such a way. A big laugh showed that in the end everyone knew how it was understandable that Burkinabe citizens wanted to carry this huge democratic hope. Some were more on the logistics side, helping friends sending text messages reminding others "should you take part in the massive robberies, you will be the shame of this country's revolution", or "here is what to do if you get tear gas in your eyes."



Some were confined to their homes, on the advice of the (French) Embassy and IPA security. But being at home did not prevent incredible things to happen to us. How many of us are in possession of a bullet that crashed one's roof and met the TV set? Well, at IPA Burkina Faso, we have at least one person. And now, while we thought it was weird at the time, we now know why, in our Country Director's twice daily calls to us, he at some point casually asked "is your roof made of concrete or aluminum?"

It is easy now to joke about it, but it was a difficult period. Not only was our country's future, and our personal fears and hopes in turmoil, many projects were put on hold, and despite harvest season going on, field activities were suspended. The staff has well managed this situation thanks to good organization and anticipation (Starting in January, a new pilot was organized in the suburbs of Ouagadougou and we explicitly asked the surveyors not to introduce anything that could start political debate at all during the interviews!).

Hopefully, the danger faded away quickly as the transition started, and all activities are now back to normal. The "warrantage" project has 40 surveyors in the Southwest of the country, and surveyor training has started for another project.

We are also at last starting to think about this revolution in scientific terms, and wondering how we can use the political situation to develop new projects for our growing office!

March 19, 2015