

Technical Know-how for Humanitarian Aid

RWTH students and alumni are active in the new Aachen chapter of "Engineers without Borders"

"Engineers, scientists and other technical specialists don't usually have it very easy," says Stephan Petersen, referring to the difficulties in finding opportunities to use technical expertise in a voluntary capacity. The qualified engineer and RWTH alumnus had long been looking for an organisation that reflected his interests, but had not found anything suitable. He then came across a small ad in the International Office about the regional branch of Ingenieure ohne Grenzen (the German member group of the aid organisation Engineers Without Borders). It was the first time he had heard of the association and, after visiting their website (www.ingenieur-ohne-grenzen.org), decided to get involved. "The more I read, the more I realised it was the perfect choice for me. I went along to the regional group's next meeting and have been an active supporting member ever since." Petersen and his colleagues Kirsten Meyer, Tobias Kötter and Gernar Nikol received an overwhelmingly positive response when they were invited by the Alumni Team to present the association's work at the Aachen alumni reunion in late April 2009.

Ingenieure ohne Grenzen e.V. was founded in 2003 by nine engineers and an economist. It is a recognised non-profit association, whose statutory fields of activity cover engineering and technical assistance, and training and research within the scope of development aid and cooperation. The initial idea was sparked by graduate engineer Jojakim Sames, whose work for the Technische Hilfswerk and the United Nations increasingly brought him into contact with problems in other countries. He found that there was often a need for engineering expertise to develop solutions to problems with water supply systems and infrastructure in particular.

The regional branch in Aachen was founded by several RWTH students in November 2008. Since then

the branch has grown quickly and around 30 active members are now working on the first batch of project concepts, which will focus on hygiene and sanitary provisions and renewable energies. The RWTH team celebrated the first fruits of its labour in June. Following a request from a training centre in a suburb of Bangalore in India, members of Ingenieure ohne Grenzen in Aachen translated the instruction manual for a lathe donated by Germany. Their work meant that the machine, which had been at the centre for eighteen months, could finally be put into operation.

In addition to the projects, one of the key aims of the branch is to create a platform where the Aachen region and its universities can exchange experiences and ideas about providing technical development aid and development cooperation. The branch is working to actively raise awareness about the organisation and its work by holding lecture series and writing articles for newspapers and magazines.

"As an experienced engineer, one of the many things that inspired me about Ingenieure ohne Grenzen was the opportunities its projects offer to participating students." Where else do students have the chance to get involved with real life engineering aid projects and experience the entire development process from start to finish? Ingenieure ohne Grenzen takes almost complete responsibility for a project, from the project conception and feasibility studies to

layout and planning, right through to construction and on-site handover. "The practical experience the students gain is staggering and it is an ideal way to prepare for a career in international project work."

However, it is important to emphasise that engineers and scientists are not the only members of the association and regional branches. Despite most active members coming from these subject areas, the individual branches require a wide variety of skills to manage, for example, their public relations work. The Aachen regional branch is also interested in getting more experienced engineers and specialists from other fields involved to bring their skills to the table. Due to his experience and contacts, Stephan Petersen is particularly involved with the fundraising group, which collects donations and looks for sponsors for existing projects. He also runs seminars and workshops on intercultural communication for active members who are preparing to join a project abroad. These events are based on similar workshops that he and his wife Alexia developed on behalf of the Alumni Team and that they hold twice a semester for all students at RWTH.

"We are looking for active and supporting members, donors and sponsors, without whom we could not continue our humanitarian projects", says Petersen. "And we would gladly welcome any RWTH alumnus, no matter what their field of expertise."

*Members of „Ingenieure ohne Grenzen“ in Aachen translated the instruction manual for a lathe donated by Germany. Their work meant that the machine could finally be put into operation.
Photo: Engineers without borders*

