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Rwanda, Sustainable Agriculture

Sustainable Agricultural and a Work-Based Solution to Global Hunger and Poverty

Rwanda is a struggling country in central Africa that is stricken with poverty, HIV/AIDS and a battered past that led to these conditions. There have been many methods and ideas that have sought to solve the global issues that are found in Rwanda; however, I believe sustainable agriculture is a viable solution, along with a work-based education and holistic approach to the individual. Through a ministry in Rwanda that my family and church help to support, I have witnessed how incorporating the principles of sustainable agriculture combined with teaching people a trade or valuable skill helps them to become self-sufficient and has the greatest impact by stabilizing families and communities for generations which can create a healthier, more secure country.

True Vineyard Ministry was started in 2007 in response to the devastating effects of the horrific genocide that happened in Rwanda to the Tutsi people in 1994. During this genocide nearly one million Tutsi Rwandans were killed over a one-hundred-day period. In an intentional method to cause further long-term damage, the surviving Tutsi women were systematically raped by HIV infected men and now many suffer from HIV/AIDS; an estimated 11% of all women and girls in Rwanda were a part of this tragedy (Wiley 2014). The genocide also left Rwanda with 600,000 widows (Wiley 2014). These events and their consequences put a tremendous amount of responsibility on the already traumatized women to raise and care for not only their own children, but also the many children that were orphaned through this attack.

True Vineyard Ministry is an organization that provides 'holistic support to Africa's poorest through job creating, community building and spiritual counsel' (Wiley 2014). They started in a community in Rwanda that was heavily affected by the genocide. The main focus of the ministry has been specifically women, because in many African cultures, women have a substantial impact on their families and communities (Wiley 2014). If the woman is educated, she is much more likely to use her means and skills to educate her children and those around her; creating the potential for a much brighter future for generations to come (DFID 2005). They teach the women how to become self-sufficient and provide for their families.

Our family became aware and involved in True Vineyard Ministries through the help of our sheep shearer who had been contacted by Diana Wiley the founder of True Vineyard in regards to learning how to shear sheep. She had come up with the idea of using sheep and wool production to help provide a means of support for some of the ladies that she had been working with in Rwanda. The next step was to acquire some sheep and educate themselves regarding

animal feeding and care. Livestock are a rarity in Rwanda because so few people can afford their purchase and care. Our sheep shearer was persuaded to go to Rwanda and teach the people how to shear sheep and harvest the wool. The ladies were then taught how to spin, dye and prepare the wool using natural dyes and products found locally. The yarn produced from the wool is then sold or used to make hand knitted products such as sweaters, hats and mittens. These products are then sold at a shop in the United States as well as internationally through a website set up through the ministry for the ladies (handspunhope.org).

These women have become independent and self-sustaining. Many have started their own businesses, and are now able to feed, clothe and educate their families. The ladies are leading by example and having huge impacts in their community. Over the past 10 years we have noticed a radical change in the lives of the ladies that have been served by True Vineyard. When the program first started the women appeared hopeless. There were no smiles and their expressions appeared hollow and lifeless. The trauma that they had endured had robbed them of their health, their dignity and most of all of any hope for a brighter future. Now, videos and pictures of the ladies show a vibrant, hopeful community where songs, laughter and smiles are a huge part of their daily lives. Even their clothing has gone from dull rags to the beautiful, bright colors of Africa. During this past decade the ministry started with 10 ladies and has grown to over 120 ladies, along with their families.

I believe that the methods that True Vineyard utilizes in Rwanda could be part of the larger solution for world hunger. Working on a more community-based level directly with the people has given those involved the means to achieve economic self-sufficiency and at the same time giving them a sense of restored dignity.

Taking a 'holistic' approach to helping people, by treating the whole person, rather than just their disease or hunger, makes for a more lasting and compassionate way to nurture and revive communities. True Vineyards does this by helping to provide shelter for the families involved, medical care, particularly for those with HIV/AIDS, and emotional support to the ladies that have been traumatized. Lasting change cannot be realized unless the needs of the whole person are met. Addressing hunger or poverty alone in a vacuum does not lead to generational change because the underlying problems that created the poverty are still in effect and will de-stabilize the situation again once the food or money begins to run out.

With the physical needs of the ladies being met through the help of True Vineyard, the children of the community were able to be placed in school where they could continue their education and the ladies themselves were educated in regards to small business principles, textile production and financial management. These education efforts will go far in lifting the families of this community out of the cycle of poverty that they have been caught in.

Implementing this model elsewhere starts with educating the adults and teaching them how to farm and raise livestock. By educating the people specifically about agriculture and how to create their own food and fiber, they are able to have direct access to life sustaining resources as well as have a way to make money for themselves. This creates an altogether more enduring solution to global hunger, one family and one community at a time. By educating the adults, you will be able to reach the children in the area as well and ensure that they are able to obtain a proper education and assure the future security of the community.

I believe that the True Vineyard model could be a better way to help people than the traditional sense of foreign aid. While providing foreign aid can certainly be helpful, it has its drawbacks. There is less chance of foreign aid having as lasting an impact, because once the resources run out, the people are likely left in the same position as before. There is also no guarantee that the aid will get to the people in need. Often the governments and leaders in countries that need the most support are corrupt. According to Olken and Pande in their paper on 'Corruption in Developing Countries' they state that "corruption is often high in low-income countries, and is costly" (Olken & Pande 2012). Whenever you have a corrupt or unstable government that does not have the needs of their people at heart, you can no longer trust them to take care of the people, whether independently or with the aid of other nations. In order to help the people, you must go directly to them to address their needs. In contrast to foreign aid, by providing a work-based education, the goal is for the people to be able to support themselves and not to rely on aid from outside sources.

So how can the True Vineyard model be used on a larger scale to help fight global hunger and poverty? First, in many countries there may already be organizations that are working to help the people achieve a better life. We must find these local organizations and resources, and either partner with them or base the approach to that particular community on the successful solutions that may already be in place.

Next, an assessment is made regarding the natural resources in the area that may be utilized and a sustainable solution is proposed to allow the community to become self-sufficient. Third, the needed resources must be acquired and provided with instructions on how the resources can be utilized to meet the needs of the community. True Vineyard accomplished this by determining that the area had a motivated group of women who were used to working with their hands. They found small tracts of land that were available that were rich in volcanic soil, but the soil was shallow and rocky, which is not suited for extensive farming. The climate in the area was a stable, cooler, temperate climate that suited itself well to small ruminant production, particularly sheep (Climate-Rwanda). Therefore, the solution for this community was to import Merino sheep, whose wool could be used to generate textile products, and the meat could be used to provide a protein source for the community. Merino sheep were specifically selected because of their high-quality fleece that could be utilized for a wide range of clothing and textile products.

The next step that must be provided is an infrastructure of support that can help meet the physical, mental and spiritual needs of the community for a period time before they can become completely self-sufficient. True Vineyard met this problem head on by helping to provide housing, medical insurance, counseling and education for the ladies involved and their children. Because True Vineyard is a Christian organization, these funds were made available through private individuals and churches.

The final aspect of continuing to help meet the needs of impoverished communities is to constantly monitor what is working and what is not and to continually have an eye for the future and how the quality of life for those in need can be positively impacted. An example of this process is True Vineyard's recent importation of Angora rabbits to provide another source of textile material for the ladies to sell and make new products. This incorporates the basic

business principle of diversification to help give the ladies another source of income as well as provide another buffer against any problem that may occur with the sheep income.

There are those who would say, “Why bother?”, after all, global hunger has been around for decades and isn’t going away anytime soon (Holt-Gimenez 2008). They may also say that the amount of resources and commitment that it would take to achieve success using this model is impossible, especially for a community-based, grass roots effort. How could you possibly reach every poverty-stricken community in the world and educate and help them along until they reach self-reliance? My answer would be for you to look in the eyes of those whose lives have been transformed by True Vineyard Ministry and tell them that this model is not a worthwhile solution.

The True Vineyard model provides a long-term solution to meeting the needs of the people in Rwanda and other impoverished and traumatized populations in the world. It by-passes potential government restriction and corruption, takes a holistic approach to the people, assesses the available resources in the area, provides a plan for the people to support themselves, and provides on-going education to both adults and children in order to break the chain of poverty and hopelessness, so the impact does not end in one generation. Solving the issue of world hunger and poverty is an enormous task that may seem insurmountable. The task reminds me of the old African proverb that answers the question of how to eat an elephant. The answer is one bite at a time. How do we solve the problem of world hunger and poverty? The answer is one person, one family, and one community at a time!

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