



Remembering Uganda with Admiration, Longing & Hope

A week with Send a Cow Uganda

By:

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It is now several weeks since I returned home to Belgium from Uganda, but I can't seem to get this beautiful country and her dignified, kind and generous people out of my mind.

My father loved Africa, and travelled to the continent frequently as part of his work with UN's Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO). Even though I grew up in Iran and Switzerland, Africa was forever present in our lives through my father's slide shows and his many stories, which he told and retold with loving relish. I remember secretly praying to God to help me grow up faster, so that I could have my own African adventures. Although as an adult, my work has required a lot of international travelling, I never had the good fortune to come to Africa except once in the mid 1990s when I visited Zimbabwe and Botswana.

This year, I had the golden opportunity to visit Uganda, not as a tourist, but as part of a Women's International Leadership Challenge training programme run by Pepal (www.pepal.org) in Kampala. This programme created partnerships between European women and Ugandan women working for various Non Governmental Organisations (NGO) in Uganda. The goal was to share experiences and expertise across sectors, enhance our leadership skills and work on a meaningful project identified by our NGO partner. The NGOs that participated in this programme were Send a Cow Uganda (SACU), the Ugandan Red Cross, NACWOLA, and Grameen.

Before leaving for Uganda, we received a security briefing, which recommended that we update our yellow-fever shots and take precautions against malaria. There seemed to be no major security risks, and I was too excited to worry about anything anyway. I flew into Entebbe and met most of the ladies who had come from various locations, and together we drove to our hotel in Kampala. That first night, I had the new experience of sleeping in a mosquito net, and was surprised to find it so cosy and comforting. The next morning, I woke up with the sound of singing birds and hauntingly beautiful church music coming through the trees from a distance. Yes, this was Sunday in Kampala, unbelievable, I was really in Africa. At last!



The SCAU-Pepal project team from Uganda, Belgium, Netherlands, France

I was partnered with Send A Cow Uganda (SACU) www.sendacowuganda.org, an amazing NGO driven by the vision of a Uganda free of poverty and malnutrition. Our Pepal project team comprised of three competent and talented ladies from SACU as well as two other Europeans, a Dutch marketing executive living in Zurich and a professional French photographer living in London. To better understand how SACU works with farmers, we began our work with a field trip to Masaka and Rakkai to meet orphaned child farmers and women farmers at different stages of working with SACU.

For example, we met two young brothers who were being trained to receive livestock. There would be no point in receiving a goat or a cow if they didn't know how to feed it or take care of it. In Masaka, we met a fifteen-year old girl named Angela who had lost her parents to AIDS, and was responsible for taking care of her siblings and the farm. She had recently received a goat from SACU. Her house, vegetable gardens and her siblings were impeccably clean and beautiful. All of them, including Angela, go to school. I wish she knew that there are not many teenagers in the world who are as brave and resourceful as she is. In Rakkai, in the company of two of SACU's extension workers we visited many women farmers, each more competent and impressive than the other. I will never forget Agnes who, as required by SACU, had already shared her good fortune with another farmer by giving away a female heifer as a gift.



On this trip through rural Uganda, I learned things intellectually, saw glorious scenery and was brought to tears by the resilience, generosity and open hearts of farmers despite their many hardships. But truly I never expected to literally smell and taste my way through Uganda! What a sensory feast! Each farmer we visited, graciously presented us with gifts of fruits and vegetables and allowed us to taste whatever we wanted in their farm. I felt guilty as I didn't want to take anything away from them, but my Ugandan teammates explained that we could not refuse their hospitality. I think I have tasted heaven in Uganda! The memory of the luscious bursting gooseberries, the gorgeous teeth shattering passion fruits, the edible-skinned mangoes, the tiny sweet bananas and the rare and mighty jack fruit, still make me smile!



We met many poor farmers who were struggling to survive. But I came away from this trip with an incredible sense of hope and possibility. In my career I have been involved in many projects where I had to assess the impact of programmes, but on this trip, I saw effectiveness with my own eyes. No sophisticated tools and measures are really necessary, the results are visible. Seeing is believing. The SACU farmers are building their knowledge and capacities, not only in areas related to livestock management, farming, or environmental protection, but more importantly they are learning life skills and self-esteem. They are optimistic, plan for the future, share their knowledge and are respected in their communities. They capture, purify and store drops of precious water, plan and prepare for the dry season, avoid pesticides and chemicals and are caring stewards of their land. Those in Europe and the US who care about sustainability can learn so much from the practices of these Ugandan farmers.

In Uganda, I crossed the equator, opened my mind, made loving friends, felt humbled, tasted heaven and found hope.



With Send a Cow Uganda team

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