

Saskatoon 13/2 2009

Project Rwanda
- a practical analysis and project description

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Cultural differences & Communication

My brother and I arrived in Rwanda, Africa on the 12th of January, 2009. Setting foot in the red dirt, smelling the mixture of sweat, open sewers, and fresh cut fruit was overwhelming in the beginning. Of course you prepare, you read up on the situation. I probably knew the African geography better than most Africans, but you can not prepare for a cultural “smash in the face”. It is so different. Even to start explaining it to someone that doesn't intend to visit Africa is almost impossible. To grasp Africa one must be there, immersed in its way of life.

At the airport we met Celestine, a brother-in-law of our contact in Rwanda, Fr. Denis Mugabo. After the three traditional cheek kisses, we got in one of Kigali's speeding taxis. If one wants a fast impression and overview of an African city, a taxi, particularly a motorbike taxi, is the way to go. On our way we passed thousands of people. There are people everywhere. Some are occupied in different tasks. Some are visiting. Some are resting. Some are on their way. But everything seems to be happening under the bare sky and on foot. Even if the traffic is pretty rough, it is more because of the lack of traffic rules than the amount of vehicles. Owning a vehicle in Rwanda is expensive and a sign of real wealth. The fuel price is basically the same as in Europe – expensive!

After a taxi ride pumped full with first impressions of this colorful country, we arrived at our living quarters, St Paul de Pastoral, which was a catholic monastery. At this particular location almost 2000 people hid from the genociders during the genocide in April, 1994. It was a strange feeling to tuck yourself into a room that you knew has had 40 people or more hiding to save their lives. Once at our place of dwelling it sunk in that we were in for a one-of-a kind three weeks. The enormous difference in way of life became quickly obvious. Everything moves slower, people save their energy and don't stress. They seem to face life in a different stride and from a different perspective. If you only can eat once a day you don't waste your energy on unnecessary things; it is about preserving, it is about survival.

Rwanda has a hot culture, meaning they have never had to be concerned about shelter from cold climate. Since prehistoric age it has always been warm. You can live out in the open, and you can grow things year around. In the northern parts of the world people have to save food for the winter, build shelters, and plan their year in order to survive. The accumulation of this experience through the centuries has led to a gap in understanding each other's cultures. During our visit I became frustrated more than once when people were late for a meeting or didn't have the urgency I did. People are not late out of lack of respect, they just have different priorities such as being present where they are. They prioritize the relations they have because that is what matters, not their pension plan. The priority is to get through the day alive. Instead of taking the bus for 500 Rwf in order to meet and discuss future buildings, they may just use those 500 Rwf to buy some food, thus avoiding hunger, choosing then to walk to the meeting. Planning ahead is non-existent because it is a luxury when you barely can survive the day.

After spending a week or so in Rwanda this fact dawned on me and made it easier to understand that everything has its time. Africa won't change overnight, and the question to ask is this: is it good if it changes? Of course people are starving and suffering in a very physical way, but at least in Africa they know the real problems that need addressing. In the Western world we have a spiritual starvation, which is not that obvious. The individualistic movement has caused this while in Africa people still live a communally interactive life. It is a huge difference. Africa can show the Western world how to live in communion, and the Western world can show Africa how an individual can pursue a dream or a goal. It can't be either or - it must be both/and. We must learn from each other.

Given this cultural background, it is easy to see how things move slowly. So when two cultures are trying to interact and co-operate, nothing is easy, from language and interpretation problems to different traditions and routines. In setting out on a project as we are, one does not realize this, and this is probably good, for if one did a start would never be made. It is learning as you go, and many mistakes are yet to be made. The important thing is that one tries to understand and be there. When people try to help each other and listen, then often a project eventually works out. It's about patience and endurance, about hope and faith, about staying put and not abandoning the ship. It's about love, which when given to people usually results in understanding each other.

We tried to learn some Kinyarwanda when we were there; we picked up a couple of words, but it is a hard language. We also taught English to students in the church building on a couple of occasions. This is important because it helps people understand each other, not only to learn the other language but to spend time together and laugh from each other's mistakes. The spoken language is one major part of co-operating in projects like this, and we want to continue learning each other's languages as much as we are able. Fr. Denis is currently working on a Kinyarwanda-English dictionary that hopefully will be published in the near future. As far as we know there is none in existence. Once again, I hint a sense of non-interest from the rest of the world.

We very much enjoyed spending time with the kids in the school, the students at the seminary, the people in the Church and Fr. Denis' family, friends and relatives. There is no better way of getting to know a people than to spend time with them, to share a meal with them. This project must find its foundation in the interaction and communion between people, otherwise it will fall apart and become just another program. It is relations that are the glue in a project like this. Where there are true relations, there is true accountability and trust. This is where the major part of other helping programs has failed, in the personal attachment and relation to the people needing the help. When communication and relations are in place, the giving party won't end up being a "sugar daddy" that sends money all the time. No, that will be the start of a change in the beneficiary's life that people actually care; and that will lead to a desire to provide for oneself, to be self-sufficient so that in the future that person can help others. It is about extending love with different means so that there can be a renewing of a victim mentality (I can't do anything about my situation) to a mentality of responsibility (I can and must help others as well as myself). How can you believe in goodness if you never have seen it? Once you have experienced goodness or love, you can't remain indifferent to it.

The Rwanda 2020 vision.

Rwanda, as a nation in the centre of Africa, has very limited power in the big political scene. The country doesn't hold many big natural resources, is landlocked, and therefore isolated and geographically undesirable. It consists of 10 million people that share a land the same size as Maryland. This means that it is extremely dense in population and that there is a permanent lack of basic food and a high percentage of unemployment (60 %). It seems like the country is too small for the number of people living there.

Rwanda is also still suffering from the effects of the 1994 genocide. Almost a million people were killed under a period of 100 days while the world just stood watching. No major country had a political or economical interest in stopping the violence. The hardest wound for Rwandan people to heal, I believe, is not the wounds between the Hutus and the Tutsies (the tribal warfare stimulated by the Belgians which was the underlying fundamental for the genocide) but the fact that the rest of the world didn't care. Rwandan people remember that to this day, and the trust is understandably hard to rebuild. Does the world care today? Will they help us?

In light of this the Rwandan government, with Paul Kagame as its leader, has formed a vision to be implemented by 2020. The vision is to present Rwanda to the world as a country to be counted on. Not so much in natural assets (even though some of the best coffee and tea in the world is produced in Rwanda today), but in human resources. The major asset of Rwanda is its people. An economic reform has to be based on human resources: service, tourism, science, and expertise. Rwanda has to turn from an agricultural economy to a service economy. The 2020 vision formulates this and the government is changing legislation to accommodate this. Rwanda is one of the easiest countries to invest in. Rwanda is one of the safest countries in Africa because the police are not corrupt. Rwanda aims to double its tourism within two years and to build a railroad from Mumbai to Kigali with the help of Tanzania. The aim is to make Rwanda a partner to consider in the international market forum by 2020.

This makes for an opportune time to launch projects that will help the government attain this goal, like building schools, because everything starts with education, with the renewal of the mind and the accumulation of knowledge that can be used in rebuilding the country. It is also a good time to buy land because soon it will be a lot more expensive.

The educational system

In Rwanda you are required to buy a school uniform to attend public school. This may sound silly, but it is not. The uniform symbolizes that one is part of something bigger than themselves. However not everybody can afford school uniforms and, therefore, do not attend school. Instead, children help provide for the family. The current number of children ages 7 through 12 attending public school is 62%. In addition to this, a small part are attending private schools or schools sponsored by charitable organizations and Churches. Fr. Denis' school is one of the latter.

The school consists of 130 students. The 5 to 9 year olds attend from 7:30-12:30 PM and the 10 to 12 olds from 7:30 – 3:30 PM. They get basic education in subjects like math, English, arts, biology, geography, history, and religion. Many of the students are orphans who cannot afford to attend public school. Therefore, Fr. Denis and his wife Dativa started this school in 2000 and are presently employing 7 teachers for the 5 classes.

The public educational school system is undergoing a major change. They are shifting the teaching languages from Kinyarwandan and French to Kinyarwandan and English. There is no more allowance to teach in French (except as a special subject). Part of the reason for this is probably France's involvement or indifference in the 1994 genocide, and, secondly, that English is the most recognized business language. This means that all teachers now need to learn English themselves.

This plays well into our work since we are from English-speaking countries and by our very heritage are able to teach English on a high level. This is looked upon positively by the government since it supports the goal they have set.

The Logistics

One of the major problems in helping people help themselves in Rwanda and other parts of Africa is that just as our the cultures clash, so does infrastructure. When the efficiency and organization of the West meets the chaos and inefficiency in Africa (for example, in one of the major ports like Dar El Salaam, Mumbai or Alexandria), setbacks are inevitable. Logistics take time and do not meet the expectations of the West. The positive part of this is that the West also needs challenging, as it tends to consume more than is healthy. The aim can't be to get Africa on the same pace in logistics and infrastructure, but to find some middle ground. First the aim must be to end conflicts and crimes in order that logistics can take place without any risk of life.

For our particular mission there are logistics to consider as well:

- How much can we ship to Rwanda?
- Is it better to transfer money and buy supplies there?
- Does the shipping cost justify us sending things there?
- How much of written material should be sent in physical form and how much in digital?
- Setting up computers is necessary so that the school and a future seminary can access digital writings and the Internet?
- In a future building project, would it be better to ship a whole container with material and furniture or would it be better to buy it?
- What does it cost to ship a container?
- Is there any cooperation and grant-funding available?
- What kind of permits are required in starting this project?
- How does the bank system work in Rwanda, and how do we get a reliable way of placing funds so that accountability can be offered both in the West and in Rwanda?
- How much money is needed to start the project and at what point should it sustain itself?
- How do we get a fairly accurate budget in place?

There are many questions and they need to be answered, as much as we are able, before embarking on a major building project. A committee of some kind is needed to do analysis and answer these questions. We must also keep accurate records for accountability to the governments and our donors.

The stages

As it stands right now, there some 70 people in St. John's congregation in Kigali meeting in a rented worship place. There is a sewing school with 22 students under the jurisdiction of Sub-deacon James in Burema outside Kigali. Out of his home (with additional buildings) Fr. Denis is schooling the 130 mostly orphan children. Fr. Denis' wife, Dativa, manages a fund called "The Good Samaritan", which distributes food to the poorest people, those who cannot work. Fr. Denis, Dativa, and their friends and family share a vision of making Rwanda better and spreading light and life in situations that are very dark. For them to continue this ministry, a permanent location is required. In addition to other obstacles, their house is scheduled for demolition by late 2010. This is part of the government's plan of rebuilding Kigali and making it a safer and healthier city.

Stage 1.

Calculate cost, prospect land, check legislation, establish contacts, get a working administration and continue with fundraising.

Stage 2.

Inspect and buy land (electricity, water, sewer) and register it. Involve architects, contractors and government. Get set plans approved by the government. Permission to build one house should be sought first. When that is in place, it will be easier to get permission for further houses.

Stage 3

Draw electricity, water and sewer to the lot. Start building the main building which might house the school and Church. The house should be built with bricks that the people make on the lot, which they also can sell. Mini projects can also start on the land to help with the fundraising and the family's income. Growing different greens and purchasing equipment to make peanut butter, juices, pesto, and other products are all possibilities. It is important that the people own the project. Once the main building is finished an evaluation should take place in order to see if the people can maintain the project themselves from that point.

Stage 4

If needed, more buildings for the purpose of dwelling places for staff, poor families (temporary), and visitors can be built. A good source of income could be to rent out room and provide food for tourists.

Stage 5

In the future, the land would be big enough to host a seminary, a library, and dormitories for students.

Self-sustainability

In all projects that aim to help people in a developing country, it is important that the “victim” is incorporated in the project and involved in the solution. If this doesn’t happen, then the circumstance for the victim won’t change. Once the money stops coming, they will be in the same position as before. This seems to be the pattern for much of the “help” to Africa thus far. This type of help continues Africa’s entrapment. While it may offer the donor satisfaction, it also absolves him of getting his hands dirty. Giving and involvement must happen together, and this will keep the people of Africa from feeling isolated and scared. Being on the receiving end and not able to contribute themselves makes them feel that they are worthless.

No, any real help that aims at changing Kigali, Rwanda and other locations in Africa in the long run must be based on incorporating the “victims” in the solution. When they are recognized as valuable equals who can contribute, then self esteem will come, with a changing from a “victim attitude” to an attitude of responsibility.

Our goal with this project is not to keep sending money forever, but to build up an organization in Kigali that can both sustain itself and further help others learn to sustain themselves. It is the responsibility of the West to teach this as it was we who destroyed the African continent by colonialism, by taking slaves and dividing people in artificial races. The West must answer this call, and the African continent must learn to sustain itself. This applies to our project as well. We can set it up, which is the aim, but in the process of setting it up, the people in Kigali need to be present and contributing so they learn how to maintain it and, later, to set others up.