

The Pearl of Africa

Charles Sukup



Editor's Note: In this feature, part of *Resource's* ongoing travel series, the Sukup family proves that opportunity, like generosity, knows no borders.

Winston Churchill described Uganda as the pearl of Africa; however, many of us remember the country more for the brutal regime of Idi Amin. Uganda has 30 million people yet is the size of Oregon (population 3.7 million). Our recent trip to this nation, which straddles the equator, was a transformative experience as the vivid memories of the lush countryside and soft-spoken people linger in my mind.

A unique characteristic of Africa stares out from a map. Unlike other continents, the national borders consist mainly of straight lines rather than contours that follow natural geography. At the Berlin Conference of 1885, European powers carved Africa into their colonies. The consequences of colonization and struggles for effective self-rule still linger.

My family traveled to Uganda with the Center for Sustainable Rural Livelihoods (CSRL) of Iowa State University. The Center originated from a couple's generous gift for utilizing the university's expertise in applying sustainable solutions for overcoming poverty and hunger. A worldwide search determined that the most significant impact could be made in Uganda by partnering with a local development group (VEDCO) and Makerere University, one of the oldest (founded 1922) and most prestigious universities in Africa, with 33,000 students.

Challenges facing Sub-Saharan Africa are legion

Two competing visions exist on how the problems can be overcome. A top-down theory of central planning

with huge amounts of foreign aid is advocated by Jeffrey Sachs in *The End of Poverty* and exemplified by the United Nations Millennium Project. The premise is that the world's poor are caught in a "poverty trap" from which Western planners must rescue them. The antithesis is described in *The White Man's Burden*. The title comes from a Rudyard Kipling poem, but the subtitle summarizes the book: *Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good*. It advocates small programs run by native "searchers" using small, specific projects. The author, William Easterly, is a development economist who became disillusioned with the central planning process. The Iowa State project follows this latter approach.



A new granary (Ugandan grain bin) built for storing corn and other grains.

CRSL partnership means progress

The CSRL partnership serves 800 households with 7500 people. In 2005, only 9 percent of the people had food security (two meals per day). Today, after educating people to grow more nutritious crops and improve eating habits, food security has grown to 90 percent!

Our daughter Elizabeth was part of the Ugandan school project where Iowa State students cleared jungle growth with a machete (which made slash and burn seem quite attractive!), expanded the school garden, and taught agricultural classes. In Uganda, making children work in the garden is often considered a punishment—some things are universal—so having white Americans gardening encouraged the children to literally dig in, both at school and at home. Planting gardens allows schools to provide nutritious lunches to students, which may be the only food they get in a day. This food security entices more children, especially girls, to attend school and stay in school longer.

A land grant university in Africa?

Some may question the role of a land grant university in Africa. However, its assistance is reminiscent of extension work done a century ago in the U.S. Midwest. Local leaders and “searchers,” frequently women, are provided education, seeds, and plant cuttings. One woman shared 80 banana plants with 19 others and now has two acres of bananas herself. Another owner was raising hogs and was very proud of her record litter of 15. Microfinancing is also used, and applicants can borrow U.S. \$300 for expanding their business. Repayment of these loans is at 100 percent. Excitement radiates from Ugandan people due to their newfound successes.

“Mzungu!”

A special delight in Uganda are the children. They jump up and down, point and squeal “Mzungu!” (white people)—similar to what we did when we saw a zebra or hippopotamus. Children run out to grasp hands and take a walk. Their spontaneity and warmth stole our hearts.

The most sobering moment of our journey occurred while visiting a mother with a severely malnourished child. Her two previous children had died, and she seemed resigned to losing her third. Both she and the child are HIV positive.



Cattle pull an ox plow, an agricultural practice considered very advanced for the Ugandan Kamuli area.

However, with intervention and better nourishment, the child and mother have since improved. Unfortunately, the medical clinics treat conditions with medicine rather than with nutritional education that could improve eating habits and long-term health.

While in Kampala I met with Dr. Levi Kasisira, head of the agricultural engineering department at Makerere University. We discussed how engineering can be utilized in Uganda. One example: walking tractors (large roto-tillers) that come from China, but the challenge is sustainability.



There was great excitement whenever “Mzungu” arrived.

I did not fully grasp the lack of mechanization until our host saw an ox plow. She exclaimed that we should take a picture of this unusual sight; otherwise we saw only people with hoes.

Amidst the extreme poverty in the countryside, where 85 percent of the people live, we marveled at the bright, colorful clothing and the use of cell phones. Numerous old buildings painted hot pink provided the advertising for the local cell phone company.



The Ugandan cell phone company, Zain, advertises by painting buildings hot pink. Cell phones are popular and eliminate the need for wiring infrastructure.

Precious H₂O

Water is the gift of life, and Ugandans walk miles for it. During our travels, we learned that a school was to be the recipient of a borehole (well), and children were thrilled to witness the drilling. One of the most moving moments of my life was the commissioning of a borehole that our family had donated. A crowd of villagers dressed in their finest, greeted us with dancing, songs, cheering, and speeches that are forever etched in our memories.



The highlight of the Sukups' journey: the well is christened.

Also assisting were students of Engineers for a Sustainable World. They had built a rain collection system and cistern to collect water during the rainy season and a biogas digester that provided gas for cooking and lighting. It was exciting to see engineering designs that were suitable for this area.

If you can—go, and make a difference

A visit to the Pearl of Africa is transforming. The spirit of her people in the midst of extreme poverty reminds us that material wealth is not a requirement for inner joy. And, as Ghandi said, there is opportunity to “Be the change you want to see in the world.”

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Ugandans celebrate the commissioning of a borehole (well). They no longer have to walk three miles for water.