

Will to Food - Well of Hope

South Sudan, Africa and a New Agriculture

by Lynn Miller
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The evolution from a sharp stick, to a steel hoe, to a moldboard plow, to trained draft animals and expanding fields of produce - it's all part of the beginning of a path to healthy families, villages and nation states for developing Africa, a path that includes sustainable organic farming practises, the improvement and maintenance of dignified human-scale agriculture, appropriate economic development, and the respect and regard of indigenous cultures.



“They” say don’t talk about starving children, don’t climb up on your soap box and preach about what needs doing to save the world, don’t even suggest the world is in any kind of trouble, just quietly and attractively speak about good stuff, or, if you have to tell unpleasant news take a cue from the wider news media and tell it like a chapter from a Stephen King novel redolent of tragic theater covered in Burbank ketchup with well-dressed carnage all told in a third person voice wrapped in the raw bacon of easy ad sales. Oh well hell, why bother then? Here I am, the suspenders of my righteous indignation have been cut and I’m holding up my pants trying to decide where to hide when I hear the kids on the street saying “dumb, dumb, that’s dumb, if it needs saying say it and get out of the way!”

Where do our eyes go? What do we actually hear? What do we allow ourselves to feel? The stories of so much of Africa are constantly laced with the details of atrocities, genocide, starvations, depravation and disease. The modern photos of this tragic part of the world often show resignation to suffering wrapped in brightly colored, magically patterned fabrics which give a ironic rag-bag beauty to defeat and death.

Pick your battles. Sometimes this applies to an assessment of what is directly essential to your own circumstances and sometimes this applies to a measurement of what might reasonably be won. And then there is that third catagory when the narrative, the images, the poignancy, the perfect horror and the bizarre familiarities pull you in, refusing to let go. For me, right now here today, that is the story of South Sudan and a crack in the moment that represents a small chance to make a difference in the lives of millions of human beings.

I’m an old western farmer, a struggling artist and an imperfect family man. That makes me a human being. I care about growing things and I care about people near and far. Sometimes I permit myself to actually think about the fact that I grow food for people and animals. Yes, I grow food! I am proud to know thousands of fellow farmers who grow food and also care about human beings. I have an old stock dog, Lucky, who is hard of hearing and doesn’t see well. I love that old dog. He wants to be with me all the time, even when its not practical. Lucky doesn’t think about the distinction between human beings and his mammal sort. I know because I’ve asked him. I say “Lucky old dog, you ever wonder about places far away where poor people struggle with existence”, and he sighs and says nothing. In that way Lucky the old stock dog is a lot like many people I know. He’d rather not be bothered about poor people a long ways away. He has his own problems. He struggles some with life, but hides it well. He’s a lot like me, only I don’t hide it so well.

I have a young friend who doesn't talk much. He works hard and communicates by example. He's a farmer. He loves growing things and he cares about people. He thinks all the time and imagines it's not obvious. He thinks about having his own farm some day - and a team of horses. I know he worries about struggling people far away, people he will never know. I know this but I can't tell you how I know it. I feel it when I look in his face. His world is vast though it is small. Just like my old dog.

My world is small though it is also vast. Because I work through publishing on farm issues worldwide, I am forced to concentrate and limit my focus in order to be effective. That's what I mean when I say my world is small though it is vast. I think this makes me different. But that really doesn't matter in the wider world, because I am insignificant, just like my old dog and my young friend. Insignificance, however, is under-rated. Insignificance often gets to the prize first, slips through the lines unnoticed, influences those around by example, starts the little ruckus that becomes a revolution, saves the life of the leader, has the best bean crop, trains the quietest team of horses, keeps the well water clean, hammers that plow point just so, stops those cows from going through the gate, wards off the predators at night, and on and on.

Sometimes, but not often, the insignificant of the world for just a moment or two take on the mantle of opinion leaders. By some twist of fate they find themselves in a room of life where others truly care about the observations of the insignificant. And so they point and they speak. If they are lucky some will take pause, look and listen.

The reportage that would give us a foreign 'news' story leaves no room for a screaming Joan of Arc, for a charging Don Quixote, for a prayerful Desmond Tutu, or for a cranky and persistent Mother Teresa. The reportage that would give us this 'news' demands the easy segway to commerce. The journalism of corporate media and the neo-journalism of the internet (made up as it is of a mixture of nasty bits of 'virtual' nonsense mixed in with critically important real time news bits) give to us a smorgasbord of the snake belly of current events, applied in scattershot with not a thought for harm or charm. The accountants and MBAs won out and the news has to generate revenue. Screenwriters have found the way; ample room is provided for the general public to sample tragedy great and small without feeling needy fingers clawing and pleading for a crumb of hope. Instead they feel the more acceptable insertions of insurance ads and beer commercials. All of this is to say unless we read one of a couple of premiere newspapers or news magazines we no longer expect to get a complete view of unfolding social drama and political power plays especially not about out-of-the-way "third world" nations. We need to seek out the long narratives, the whole stories, even the tangents, if we are to get the full picture of troubles elsewhere in the world. And we need to do that because those difficulties out away from us, today, are the incubators for equally terrible things happening on our doorstep, here in North America, in the very near future.

Insignificant people touched by stories need to step up and report what they see. Don't wait for officialdom to do it, don't wait for industry to do it, don't wait for the deadzone of most daily journalism to do it.

South Sudan, a new equatorial nation in east-central Africa, is a paradox wrapped in opportunity. It is a poor country and it is a rich country. It is a vigorous nation which needs help. An answer to their need might contain an opportunity for it to contribute widely to the stability of the region and by example to peace in the world. South Sudan does not now feed itself, it is dependent on less than stable imports from neighboring countries. People there are hungry. Some in positions of leadership in that fledgling democracy believe that the best ways to solve this problem also offer up excellent patterns for a rich scale-specific economic development

The people of South Sudan are ready, willing and able to grow their own food. There is, however, a puzzle as to how they might best do this. A few basic pieces of that puzzle have been missing. The insight of one man in diplomatic service may have found the missing pieces and triggered a reasonable way forward. The continuing ef-

forts of a small and dedicated group of individuals would seem to assure a good, and perhaps outstanding chance of success. There is an implicit model here which should be of benefit to assorted diplomatic efforts around the planet.

Today almost all of South Sudan's farming is done by hand, with crude hand hoes for tillage. Imagine the images of women and children swinging wooden handled digging hoes to break up land, imagine how much time and effort goes into working up a small plot. There is no history of general use of tractors and modern industrial farming practices. There is no infrastructure in place to support such endeavors. But these people know what it takes to grow food, they just lack a way to reasonably increase their efforts. And by 'reasonable' we are talking about giving these folks tools and power sources that are readily and inexpensively 'accessible'. South Sudanese aren't going to jump a cultural canyon and disrupt who they are and where they came from to try to accommodate industrial-scale agriculture. But they will consider easing down into a logical valley of growth and evolution.

South Sudanese agricultural production could be increased by up to 200% through the sensible and careful introduction of animal-powered organic farming systems. Now, that's wild! Imagine the power and comfort of such an idea well applied. These hard working people are ideally suited to accept this transformation. Such a move could work with the ample cattle population to also improve family, community and tribal cultures. The introduction of animal-power, employing a less-is-more approach to development, need not be expensive nor cause cultural upheaval. It can be accomplished in a series of quiet, steady and simply planned steps. And those steps call for suitable connections with individuals, institutions and small businesses. Those steps presume that there exists an infrastructure somewhere out in the wider world that can supply, support and encourage such outreach and development. And it does exist. But you need a map and a guide to get there from here. Cyber maps and internet searches won't get you there.

These things came to my sharp attention recently. From Oregon, as editor/publisher of *Small Farmer's Journal*, I have worked on issues of organic farming, self-sufficiency, small farms and animal power for forty years so it came as only a small surprise when I was approached by the Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Juba, South Sudan with a request for assistance that centered on oxen power and organic farming.

Michael McClellan asked me if I could possibly help an African TV film crew gain access to the worlds of animal-powered sustainable farming in the US. He also asked Richard Roosenberg, executive director of Tillers International in Michigan. (Tillers has an outstanding relationship with successful oxen-base farming initiatives in Uganda and The Congo.) McClellan, a subscriber to *Small Farmer's Journal* and other US publications serving the alternative agriculture communities, had identified through his readings and study, that South Sudanese farmers could be usefully impressed and positively influenced by a view of Amish farming and community as well as the wider new farming efforts encompassing the concepts of CSAs, market gardening, local food movements, and oxen power. He asked of Mr. Roosenberg and I that we orchestrate visits and discussions with Amish farmers, equipment manufacturers and opinion leaders.

The plan was to send a two-man South Sudanese TV crew to meet up in the US with a state department official assisting in travel to Ohio, Michigan and Illinois from end of June through the first week of July 2013. Through personal contacts with Amish philosopher David Kline of *Farming* magazine and the ingenious Wengerd family of Pioneer Equipment, a full and varied itinerary was devised permitting the crew to visit many different types of Amish farms, businesses and market events. Richard Roosenberg then planned many visits for them to and around the *Tiller's International* facility in Michigan, immersing the crew in international development approaches to farming with oxen and horses as well as visits to small farms centering on the ownership, management and labor of women. Many South Sudanese farmers are women. The third leg of their time in the US centered on a three day visit to the annual *Horse Progress Days* (a farming trade and demonstration fair centered on animal power), this year in Arcola, Illinois. At this event many new contacts were made to strengthen and embolden the TV film-crew of Alex Taban and Henry Jada in their growing case for a new South Sudanese ag-

riculture. But all of this puts the proverbial cart before the horse, let's backup and look at some of that country's realities and distinctions.

South Sudan is but two years old, born after 50 years of hideous and costly civil war resulted in a splitting off from Sudan. South Sudan is a nation of approximately 8 million people on a land mass roughly the size of Texas. There are 200 miles of roads and no electricity, no clean water source, and just one hospital. In that poor country the very ill who still hold a chance of cure must pile up four to a bed. The land of this equatorial nation holds great natural resources including abundant virgin soils, huge grasslands and the upper Nile River yet its people use spades and hoes to try to farm. An extensive herd of millions of distinctive regional cattle cohabitate with scores of wildlife, graziers and carnivores. Bordered by Sudan, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda and The Congo, South Sudan's millions depend on imports for food, even though by normal measure they should be able to feed themselves.

Proud though they may be for their hard won independence, this new country has all of the difficult and terrible conditions - poverty, hunger, disease, tribal suspicions and depression - to thrust it back in to continuing internal strife. There exists a genuine even critical urgency for the leaders to find ways to grow South Sudan's agriculture towards self-sufficiency and proud health. Urgency frequently dulls the vision by a move to simplistic answers, but the South Sudanese leadership has somehow managed to see beyond and clearly that its best future rests with giving its people the appropriate tools and instruction to farm sustainably and with identity enhanced. In this way and with these conditions, South Sudan represents one interesting model for much of the developing world of the twenty-first century.

People are dying the world over from starvation and preventable disease. Yet these same peoples often sit upon the very resources that might end starvation and curb disease. Around the world a child dies every four seconds of hunger. It need not happen. And those primary resources, soil, water, indigenous biologies, wildlife, forest, native plants, minerals, spirit and songs, are also the key to the additional powerful fuels for warmth, cooking, health and cultural identity. These resources are what will allow the human species to grow beyond the plasticized western version.

People are dying the world over from starvation and preventable disease, and bureaucrats and academics believe they know how to fix that while making a profit for corporations.

People are dying the world over from starvation and preventable disease and the farmers, mechanics, doctors, teachers and soldiers of other countries feel deep down the need to help.

It's a race and to the victor go either great short term profits or long term good will. It should be obvious that the long-term good will has a value to humanity and the planet that far outstrips the value to a few bank accounts.

There has long been the risk within academia and governance to see scale of human endeavor as an inverted triangle. Impoverished nations attract the most dramatic examples of testing ground for such theories. The one struggling man or woman trying to scratch a few seeds into the ground is seen as the problem, the narrow end of the triangle. As the problematic theory would have it, we need to get that man or woman out of the way and roll in with tractors, chemicals and GMO seed to plant that ground. Social engineers want to believe that if we could only move constantly towards ever larger scales, efficiencies and economic stabilities would always result. They do not see that this direction often results in a dissipation of effort that feeds economic disparity. They do not see that applying industrial agricultural systems and structures to a poor less developed nation does not feed its people, it feeds the corporate structures. They do not see that from a political standpoint forcing such dramatic change on indigenous cultures fuels the suspicions and hatreds that result in greater instability. A large field of

genetically modified corn or soybeans in a country like South Sudan would work dramatically to threaten the very weave of that rich nation's cultural fabric while accomplishing little to feed its people. Instead the board rooms benefit as that crop enters the commodity market, most likely for export.

They do not see that each and every individual trying to scratch a seed into the ground is a powerful resource and that they are intrinsic to the identity of that nation; that what needs to happen is to take the best and most practical of the wider world's agricultural successes and distill those down to their primary essence, to the simplest of tools and procedures, in other words appropriate technology. The support of each and every small farmer or potential small farmer is the formula which will allow South Sudan to feed its own people, develop its economy and allow its native culture to flourish.

In the beginning of the twenty-first century we are offered many views of struggling nations and desperate peoples anxious to be able to feed and shelter their families, while building towards a preferred peaceable economic development. From the west we may see them as third world or developing nations, but from their own perspectives they are first world yet forgotten nations. We see them as behind by comparison assuming that our societies are the model of security and success. We see them as the breeding ground for not only plague and pestilence but also war and terrorism. We criticize those societies and characterize them as lazy, backwards and morally insolvent. It is not the societies which breed war, terrorism, and poverty. Today it is often the imbalance and inequity caused by corporate control over natural resources, human endeavors, banking, scientific enquiry, narcotics and weaponry. War brings profits while peace drains the corporate coffers; we need new definitions of economic stability and growth, definitions which account for all aspects of a culture and its people.

The Butzian admonishment of the seventies to "get big or get out" was fully embraced by the board rooms of commodity markets and fueled by ag economists until it became implied federal policy. This most unfortunate position has given us neutered and weakened GMO plant varieties peppering the world landscape and reinforced by patent law while diminishing each nation's ability to feed itself, it has given us a plague of agricultural poisons that have rendered millions of acres nearly sterile and created massive dead zones in the seas. We've exported this madness around the world to further devastating results including the destruction of rain forests, the disruption of centuries old farming traditions, the extinction of plant and animal varieties, the liquidation of small towns and villages and the massive small farmer suicides in India. We may be hard pressed to see this but, ironically, many far-sighted developing nations see it and they don't want anything to do with it. It is a matter of scale, appropriate human scale versus corporate industrial scale.

So-called archaic notions of family, community, and faith, go to the core of those most vital of scale issues. Respect for the primacy of these notions would go a long way towards the US once again earning the regard of developing nations. How does a state department go about respecting such hard to define notions? By allowing that the people on the ground have primary say in designing approach and attitude. This was dramatically demonstrated by Michael McClellan and his unique TV project.

The idea was simple enough. Provide a film that South Sudanese farmers and social engineers could watch that showed what a span of two oxen could accomplish hitched to a modern walking plow. Show men, women and children operating that plow. Allow the indigenous farmers to see for themselves the incredible dramatic difference between what a span of oxen could accomplish in a day as versus that hoe. Show video of young calves being trained to work yoked together. Show a variety of new implements at work. And then provide a panorama of the rich and vibrant animal-powered community of North America featuring in part of course the legendary Amish. McClellan understood that his first task was to convince the farmers of South Sudan that this could be done, could be done well, would improve production and was exciting in its modern manifestation. He had to convince them that this represented a step forward not backwards. He chose to work with important young men

of South Sudan, film-maker Alex Taban and journalist Henry Jadar, to encourage and facilitate production of a Television Show for all of South Sudan and much of Africa.

To accomplish his ambitious goal McClellan understood he needed access to the sometimes private world of the Amish farm community and the far flung industry of North American animal power. He found that access when he communicated with Richard Roosenberg and myself, Lynn Miller. We were willing and able to help to arrange such introductions and arrangements. The next step in the process was to have an individual of suitable skills and talents to actually guide the filmmakers on the ground in the states. He found that man in State Department contractor Kevin Krug, an intelligent individual of true sensitivity and appropriate experience.

One of the results that Michael McClellan could not have foreseen is the amplified enthusiasms that were found everywhere the film crew visited. Amish and non-Amish animal-powered American farmers were thrilled to share their working ways with the crew. And in that process discussions ensued that cast a wider net out to how this vital community might assist in international development while learning themselves of new ways to work and value their skills. This South Sudanese initiative did not spring up in a vacume. The synchronicity of many parallel connections and experiences is quite remarkable. Discussions included not only South Sudan but also projects in Mali, Uganda, The Congo, Afganistan and elsewhere. And the discussions are important to North American non-governmental intiatives from entities as far flung as the Minnesota National Guard, the Sam Houston University of Texas, the Horse Progress Days board, and Tillers International. But the focus was never lost. The focus is an effort to assist South Sudan in its goal to realize self-sufficiency.

With these large sweeping concerns, objectives and ideals, determining a plan for the best beginning is a sensitive and critical matter. Recent international development histories are full of the evidence of failed and/or misguided efforts that began with grandiose ceremony and truckloads of money, two elements always certain to attract professional pilferers on and off territory. A few of the most dramatically effective developmental efforts began quietly and modestly on the ground, out back as it were; look to Tiller's International as a sterling example of modesty and effectiveness. The South Sudanese farming condition and objective would suggest that this *small-can-be-effective* approach would apply ideally well here.

After consulting with many people including Henry Jadar and Alex Taban of South Sudan, I suggested an outline of a possible plan of action to my friend Richard Roosenberg of Tillers and he passed the rough concept along to his staff for review and revision. What follows are their suggestions for an intelligent way forward, one which takes into consideration the many successful projects, talents, cultural realities and relationships in the region.

Under the auspices of an *Oxen for South Sudan* volunteer committee; (*Possible Plan of Action drafted by Lynn Miller with extensive Suggestions for Modifications drafted by staff of Tillers International, July 30, 2013*)

Demo and Recruitment

- *Identify at least 30 South Sudanese people interested in being ox-powered farmers, trainers of ox-powered farms, and artisans to build improved yokes and ploughs*
- *Recruit North Americans proficient with oxen methods (Tillers staff and volunteers) to organize the demonstrations*
- *Recruit Sudanese 'Lost Boys' and/or north Ugandans to help with demonstrations and lead the recruitment*
- *Identify well-trained oxen from northern Uganda to transport to demonstration sites. Animals need to perform impressively in demonstrations*
- *Find or commission ox ploughs, yokes, and sledges from artisans in north Uganda for demonstrations*

Training of Trainers

- Establish a corps, including women, of 8 trainers of ox-powered farming who are willing to work in 5 to 12-day village level training sessions
- Conduct a training of farmers class for 20+ of the first recruits
- Select 8 trainees for a more intensive training of trainers follow-up
- Conduct a yoke making and artisan training session for 8+ of the first recruits

Scaling Up Demos and Farmer Recruitment

- Take demos of ox-ploughing to villages in several South Sudanese States as recruitment for training candidates
- Staff with lead persons from Uganda and new trainers from South Sudan
- Quality control maintained by visits from international volunteers and Tillers staff

Scaling Up Training of Farmers and Oxen

- Develop a seasonal schedule of training (outside intensive plowing and planting times) with 2 week trainings of farmers and cattle at the village level in groups of 12-15 farms (2 people each plus oxen)
- Assign trainer teams (2 ox & farming trainers, 1 artisan trainer) for each session with provisions for tools and supplies
- After first season of training, recruit best farmers from the season's training sessions and conduct an additional training of trainers to expand capabilities

Developing Local Artisan Support for Tool Needs

- Build an artisan training and tool re-invention center
- Have a continuing program of building implements, repair, and re-design based on feedback from farmers

Supplying and Financing Tools and Livestock

- Start a youth calf training program
- Create an enterprise incubator for artisans to become sustainable rural businesses
- Develop a credit or micro-finance system for the tools, require that farmers provide their own cattle

Re-Invention of Tools for South Sudan Needs

- Bring Amish and American tool makers in to collaborate with South Sudanese artisans and farmers in design sessions to hone the appropriateness of implements.
- Test tools with dynamometers and in on-farm trials.
- Send local artisans on exchange training to Uganda and Ethiopia
- Review Field Practices to Hone Best Practices of a New Agriculture

It would be hoped that the people, seeing their magnificent cattle employed in such exciting and beneficial ways, would naturally want to add aspect by incorporating images, stories and songs of Oxen into their daily lives.

And what's in it for those of us who want to help? A chance to prove that charitable hearts do exist and need nothing more than to believe that small efforts might raise the veil of suffering for a few brave souls, might help people we will never know personally to be able to feed their own families, might turn rifles into planters and tanks into chicken houses, might honor one of the birthplaces of civilization with a proper thank you.

Side bars

MALI CONNECTION

In the 2013 Horse Progress Days program catalog an article entitled *The Mali Connection* was presented by Wayne Wegerd of Dalton, Ohio. Mr. Wegerd is Amish and his family have Pioneer Equipment which manufactures new animal powered technologies and sells those around the world. He wrote,

“In the spring of 2010 we, here at Pioneer Equipment, had four visitors from Mali, Africa, wanting to learn more about how to farm with animal power, how to maximize the efficiency of their animals, and how to harness wind and solar power.”

“...Most of Mali’s people reside in small villages... and raise crops for a living. Many can only raise enough food for their own use. Almost no one can afford to own the most basic farm equipment or tractors. Therefore, most of the farming, as well as transportation, is still done using traditional human or animal powered tools...”

“Malnutrition is still prevalent and starvation is not uncommon. According to the World Health Organization only one out of three children live to five years old.”

Wayne reported that the information exchange was extremely positive with lots of ideas and more questions the result. The Malian visitors were keen to return home with new plans.

Attendant with the Mali delegation to Ohio was Aghatum Ag Alhaisane, the Mali Minister of Agriculture as well as a former Colonel in the military. Their stateside visit culminated with a trip to Washington DC and a meeting with the US secretary of agriculture.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT - TEXAS STYLE

Jim Hynes, a professor at Sam Houston University near San Antonio, Texas, spearheads a program that works with people and organizations from Third World countries that are seeking assistance with better farming practices. Professor Hynes helps to place foreign visitors on working US farms and suitable learning environments to allow them to return home with the most appropriate and applicable information. Jim Hynes travels to Africa and works on international development issues there in Uganda, The Congo and South Sudan.

UGANDAN INVENTOR

Nick Graber owner of Graber Steel and Fabrication in Odon, Indiana and chairman of the board of Horse Progress Days welcomed Joseph Kavuma of Uganda, Africa, to his Amish farm in June of 2012. The visit was coordinated and facilitated by Professor Jim W. Hynes Ph.D. of Sam Houston University in Texas. Mr. Kavuma, an inventor and steel fabricator back at his home, was visiting to learn as much as he could about animal powered systems and the non-electric shop techniques of the Amish. Mr. Kavuma went on from Indiana to visit the 2012 Horse Progress Days in Clare, Michigan. What Joseph learned and took with him back to Africa has added to his impressive accomplishments in appropriate technology design and application in Uganda. From Treadmills, inspired by those of Athens Treadmills of Kentucky to plows and cultivators, Joseph Kavuma is making a big difference so much so that he is the first ever winner of the Presidential Science Award in his country.

HORSE PROGRESS DAYS

This stellar annual event began in 1994 as a showcase for the latest developments in animal-power technologies. Rotating around the US to six different Amish communities in five states, HPD attracts thousands of paying visitors from all over the world to view field demonstrations of the latest in plows, harrows, cultivators, manure spreaders, harvest equipment, market garden tools, and timber handling implements. The largest event of its type

worldwide, HPD board members have taken an active interest in how what they do benefits international development.

TILLERS INTERNATIONAL

Richard Roosenberg and Tillers International of Scotts, Michigan promote an attitude of experimentation while reinventing traditional American farm skills and equipment to provide modern, low tech, low-capital tools for international farmers, working with them to improve productivity of their farms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lynn Miller is founder editor and publisher of Small Farmer's Journal an international agrarian quarterly which has for 37 years featured technical and cultural information on the best animal power alternatives for farming. He is the author of fourteen books and has travelled extensively conducting lectures and workshops on these subjects. He is located in Oregon.