

Action for Africa Londoners make a difference

-by Jane Roy for the London Free Press on Feb 14, 2009

"Save Africa through Africa."

These words hang precariously at the front of the chapel in Gordhim, south Sudan, the region where Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan (CASS) has been operating since the late 1990s. The sign remained suspended through some of the most difficult years of Africa's longest-running civil war and hangs still, now that peace has come to the region. The wording, while simple, represents the full thrust of CASS's programming.

Conventional wisdom has been repeating for years that the African continent is a hopeless cause, beset by corruption, crumbling business investment and ineffective international aid. Yet the actions of Londoners in south Sudan have turned that theory on its head, in the process developing the prototype that might well lead to a successful future for the average African.

While much foreign intervention has concentrated on urban centres, more than 80 per cent of Africans live in rural settings -- regions largely bypassed by the international community. CASS opted to concentrate its efforts in the remote region of Aweil East, in south Sudan, and those efforts are bearing fruit.

What began as a four-year effort to fight slavery in the southern region has been transformed into a diverse range of programs that bring significant hope to a people time had forgotten.

Each one of these initiatives has been driven and supported by Londoners. They include Denise Pelley and Lucy Ogletree, who have been busy transforming the outlook of young people in Aweil East by holding music and art camps. What started out as an attempt to use the arts as a means of self-expression has become a three-year-old celebration of inner wells of compassion and dedication of the Sudanese themselves.

Meanwhile, Kim Spriet, Hayley McKinnon and Lynn Blumas, under the watchful eye of Alex Lau and Bob Dell, have initiated the Water School -- an innovative undertaking that harnesses the sun's ultraviolet rays to purify water. With 80 per cent of the region's diseases water-borne, this project stands to have a transforming effect. The process recently garnered the support of Maude Barlow, the UN's chief water advisor.

Nicole Spriet, Glen Pearson and I have concentrated on the construction of primary schools. With the recent opening of the Canada School, buildings that were meant to house 600 students are currently instructing 1,200 future scholars, with some of the classrooms now being used to teach secondary school courses.

CASS's most popular program, Abuk's Herd, has received enough donations from Londoners to provide a significant quantity of goats to assist exiles, former slaves

and returnees. Donors to this initiative range from seniors to primary school classes right here in London.

One of the lessons learned by the West over the past five decades is that money thrown at various business ventures in Africa are, in most cases, doomed to failure because of a failed understanding of how local markets work in rural Africa. Also, people do not embrace the kind of patience required to move at the pace with which the people function in their daily lives.

CASS's Smart Aid program is designed to fund those kinds of micro-enterprises that flourish within this kind of African context.

The success of these ventures is a credit to those Londoners with a business mindset who are unwilling to force Western ideology on the Aweil East community, but instead are taking their time in areas like sewing and carpentry to get it done right. From supporting a Sudanese refugee school in Nairobi, Kenya, to supplying scholarships for secondary school training in other regions, many Londoners have had a direct hand in training the future leaders of the region.

This is no small matter, as opportunities for more advanced education beyond the primary grades is extremely limited.

From the beginning, Canadian Aid for Southern Sudan has nurtured relationships and ideas with the last three federal governments and the other opposition parties. Those efforts have begun to bring about some remarkable changes in this remote area of south Sudan.

Carolyn Bennett, the former minister of health, has joined us on our last two trips and is working with the Canadian International Development Agency to assist in the funding of the small medical clinic in the area that is overrun with victims of cholera. Glen Pearson has only been able to spend one week a year in Sudan because of his new duties as a Member of Parliament, yet the \$3 million he requested from the prime minister last year has been granted and disbursed to those internally displaced people from Darfur.

Thousands of these individuals suddenly arrived in the Aweil East region. That the initial group of these people from Darfur was discovered by a team of London businesspeople two years ago is a testament to how our own Forest City has had a remarkable effect half a world away.

For the past number of years, teams of Londoners have travelled to Aweil East in Sudan and assisted CASS in its diverse programming. It is no accident the people of that region don't so much talk about Canada as they do about London.

By working with local groups at a patient pace and trusting in the inherent dedication and strength of the people of Aweil East, that sign -- "Save Africa through Africa" -- has become a fitting motto to the people of our own city, who return year after year to nurture the remarkable spirit of a challenged people in Sudan.

In a recent discussion with federal government officials, it was said no other city in Canada has nearly the kind of hopeful influence on south Sudan as has our own city. It is a decade of difference, and the efforts of so many Londoners in the past few

years has brought about an era of peace and emerging prosperity that hasn't been seen in the region for decades.

A Project Like No Other

Almost a decade ago, during the most difficult and bloody days of the civil war, CASS officials were taken by the local commissioner to the site of an old secondary school in Yargot, Aweil East. Bombed into a useless state, the building once represented the ultimate hopes of all people in the region for an education that went beyond the primary grades. It was the only high school at that time in the south, but it had been closed for decades.

The commissioner told of the glory days of the high school and how most of the south's present leaders had graduated from its classrooms. "Is there any way the people of Canada could help us rebuild it?" he asked humbly. CASS said it would do what it could.

That promise is now close to fruition. A number of months ago, CASS officials met with former prime minister Paul Martin in Ottawa, who has always shared a keen interest in Sudan and Darfur.

At the end of the discussion, Martin handed over a cheque from his own funds for \$100,000 to act as seed money for the building of a new high school on the old site. "Use this to help raise the rest of the funds required for its construction," he said. He also committed to come to Yargot for its official opening.

With an ultimate price tag of \$400,000, the school will nevertheless rejuvenate the entire region and service students within a 600-kilometre range. More than anything, the prospect of its construction has reminded the southern Sudanese of their rich heritage and the possibility of a brighter future.

Girls have a difficult time getting an education in the area and attending a high school has been out of the question. No more. When it opens a year from now, it will offer boarding facilities for girls and courses to help them become effective community leaders in the future. CASS programming like the Water School and training for micro-enterprises will form part of its curriculum.

The infusion of the Darfur displaced people in the region has also opened up the opportunity for the victims of that terrible conflict to also be educated at that level -- something never dreamed of by the people of Darfur.

In light of this, some of the classes will be instructed in Arabic. For the CASS organization and its largely London board, the undertaking of the secondary school will be the culmination of 10 years of commitment to the area. While we intend to remain involved in Aweil East for years to come, it is doubtful that any one project will have more of a profound effect on the entire area than the construction of this school.

Londoners have generously donated to the cause, but there is more to be raised and more deliberations with the Government of Canada and the Ministry of Education in south Sudan to be undertaken. But at long last, the people of Aweil East will possess the crowning achievement of administering their own secondary school with a curriculum developed by their own nation.

The Gathering

One of our greatest revelations from our recent trip to the region a few weeks ago was the discovery that the southern Sudanese government is increasingly staffed by Sudanese who have returned from the West to fulfill the vital roles required by an emerging administration.

One such example was Sabrino Majok. Visiting him in his office for the Ministry of Finance in Aweil Town was something of an education in itself. He opened up conversation with perfect English and spoke of his recent return from Canada. "Canada?" was responded to with delight. "Yes, I was trained there and eventually became a high-school teacher."

We were even more stunned to hear he initially lived in London and received much of his training there. "I loved London," he said with enthusiasm, "and it has equipped me for the huge undertaking I am responsible for here in the south." Having left his family in Canada for the time being, Sabrino is just one of a large number of leaders who, having trained in the West, are now returning and taking on significant leadership roles in south Sudan.

In this way, too, Canada and London continue to have a profound effect in that once-troubled land.

"If it wasn't for London and the training I received there, I would never be equipped to lead our people into a future that will be different from our past," Sabrino said. "And if you get the chance, can you please tell the people of that great city that their efforts on my behalf have been well spent? I appreciate their willingness to work with me to prepare me for this moment."

It's something we at CASS have taken to calling "the gathering." It's a remarkable development we hadn't fully appreciated until this last trip.

For the large London team, it represented a new level of accountability and professionalism that will provide a broad framework for our many programs. And it showed once again that our own city has played a role far greater than it might expect.

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