

Putting Down Our Guns and Returning Home

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Life in Lira: Living On the Edge

Despite its beauty, living in Lira, Uganda in the year 2000 offered many challenges to the average citizen. Most families in Lira District made their living from the soil and the margin of error separating them from impoverishment was often as narrow as a prolonged drought. Parent's struggled to find ways to pay for their children's uniforms, books and the modest school fees. For most, receiving an elementary school education was the last opportunity to receive formal

classroom schooling.

Attitudes among school children in Lira differed from what I was used to seeing, and in general I liked the differences. Children uncomplainingly walked long distances to school in uniforms that they wore with obvious pride. The school day was seen as a learning opportunity and also a way to a brighter future. In Lira the conformity in dress was easily accepted as school was understood to be for learning not for fashion statements.



Educational institutes in Lira and throughout Uganda were mainly started by religious organizations and many have remained in their care. One can learn a lot about people by observing how they care for things. If you were to visit and look into a typical classroom in Lira you would see in its simplicity a cleanliness and care that spoke much to the cultural ethos of the community. This is a good indication of how the community valued education.

While visiting the same school you would likely observe students gathered in small segregated clusters, boys on one side and girls on the other. Watching the activities and interaction between students and with instructors, an observer can recognize a fine balance of spontaneity and protocols. Respectfulness is a word that describes the environment well.

Antidotes to Civil Strife

Prior to our **Religious Youth Service (RYS)** team's arrival, there was considerable unrest spilling into the Lira District in part agitated by warlords from neighboring Sudan. Gun toting recruiting agents representing the warlords targeted areas where poverty sank its teeth bone deep. For some frustrated fathers a political enemy appeared as an easier opponent than that of remorseless poverty. Some good people were torn between the choice of picking up guns in hopes of shaping a better future, or ignoring the cries of their hungry children. It was not a situation that can easily be judged on a full stomach.

Lira had been the site of gunfights and killing between rebels and police. Fortunately, many of the raiding combatants lacked a deep emotional commitment to their fight. It was during a lull in the violence that my friend Massimo Trombin came to Lira as part of his work as European Director of the **International Relief Friendship Foundation (IRFF)**. In researching ways for the **IRFF** to better serve the community, Massimo met a young rebel leader (I'll call him Michael).

After an initially 'feeling out period', Michael shared with Massimo his background and offered his own thoughts and experiences involving the rural poor. As trust deepened, Michael shared the reasons why he originally decided to pick up arms and what was needed to have him put down his gun. Maybe it was because they shared the same birthday, but clearly something aligned in their relationship and soon Michael and Massimo became good friends. The two were destined to work together on projects that would help local civilians, and also reach those that wanted to turn in their guns and rejoin society.

Economic Alternatives Create Paths to Peace

In listening and sharing with Michael and others, Massimo realized that by having more attractive economic alternatives families would not be easily swayed by the offers or the threats of the rebels. Massimo began thinking and shaping a plan to provide families a path towards greater economic security. Turning to his network of friends, Massimo sought advice from Mr. Rutangye, a native Ugandan who was an environmental education leader in the national government.

Mr. Rutangye was consistently putting together practical and sustainable projects for the benefit of Ugandan farmers. Rutangye suggested that his work with a new high-grade banana plant in another region could probably work well in Lira District. This new banana plant would allow each tree to produce more fruit and more fruit meant more profit for the local farmer.



While improving the yield on bananas was an important benefit for the majority of local farmers, Rutangye also wanted to pioneer the growth of a cash crop new to the area, coffee. Timing is critical in the field of agriculture and the timing pointed in the favor of Lira farmers. A spike in the worldwide coffee market was making it economical to open new areas for coffee cultivation. The Lira district had rich soil and a suitable climate to produce a fine grade of coffee. For families in Lira, a good coffee crop could open school doors for more children and help them break free of the gravity of poverty.

Massimo and Mr. Rutangye worked on a plan to help make that happen. As the plan developed the International RYS Director, John Gehring was called in to have **RYS international** volunteers contribute their piece to that plan.

Implementing a Sustainable Plan

Our combined team worked with an understanding that successful development projects should be designed to be as sustainable as possible. Poor families predictably suffer from a lack of capital so it is better to draw on local knowledge and skills whenever possible. Why should villagers spend precious money on buying something from another area if they can find an adequate local replacement? Why import expensive experts to fix things when you can make it work using local materials with local expertise?

Indigenous knowledge and insights can differ from town to town, region to region, nation to nation. An example of how this knowledge can be used occurred in the work in Lira. In Lira, harmful fungi grow on the unprotected roots of banana plants which hinder or kill their growth. Instead of purchasing a high priced chemical spray manufactured in a distant country, Mr. Rutangye brought a solution he learned in another part of Uganda. He showed local trainees that dipping the roots of the banana cuttings into a diluted mixture of water and cow urine it prevented the fungi from growing. Cow urine is free, readily available and not harmful to the soil so in sharing indigenous knowledge a local solution to a problem was solved.



The process of effectively linking ‘new ideas and methods’ to indigenous knowledge requires local community involvement. The help of a well-respected local leader was needed for the Lira community outreach and that naturally brought us to Parliament Member, Betty Okwea. “Momma” Betty loved the plan and went into action by mobilizing local village councils. The councils of each village soon sent a team of youth leaders to join our RYS project where local agricultural training was the central service. After completing the training, Mr. Rutangye and his staff provided the seeds and plantings

for the graduates to take back to their villages.

The graduates of the program were charged with teaching farmer’s the ‘new’ methods and passing on the seedlings to those in their villages. So the initial training program had a ripple effect as villages picked up on what was learned. As the efforts spread they helped reshape the way agriculture was to be done in the district. With the tools and knowledge provided, each youth leader brought home an opportunity for his areas farms to more than double their annual income.

Putting Down the Gun and Picking Up a Hoe

In Lira, as in other communities suffering from violent civil strife, people long for the day when the guns are put down. Rebels who take the huge step of turning in their guns are called *Returnees*. It is a very difficult transition to go from an outlaw soldier to civilian life for the Returnee. Often the stinging poverty and troubles that they fled awaited for them on their return. Michael while transitioning from rebel leader to Returnee regularly discussed with Massimo the challenges that come up when you choose to put away your gun and return home.



The agricultural work that Massimo helped to introduce to village leaders caught Michael's attention as it offered the promise of improving his situation. Michael also realized that the potential increase in agricultural yields could lure many other rebels away from guns. In dealing with improving the situation for farmers in Lira the community was given an opportunity to help the rebels peacefully return.

Resentment towards the rebels was real in Lira and a process was needed to help make it easier for all parties to reconcile and live together. Massimo decided to give IRFF support to an agricultural

project aimed at servicing the widows of rebels as they often were in very desperate situations. To the citizens of Lira, the widows were much easier to sympathize with than those that did actual fighting. After the success of this program with widows, the IRFF opened participation to actual Returnees. Rebels began to turn in their guns and pick up their hoes.

Returning Home

The program's success helped nearly two hundred men make the transition and return to their families. In a short time the larger community began to recognize the value of these efforts and they encouraged Minister Betty Okwea to report the success to the national government. Leaders in the government saw the project as a model for encouraging Returnees and they began to adopt it in different parts of Uganda.



It is true that all the world's rebels are not rebels because of poverty. Yet as a member of humanity we can and should work to offer people in desperate situations an acceptable alternative to violence. If one answer to the sting of poverty was found in something as mundane as cow urine, a hybrid banana seedling and a coffee bean, how many other answers are waiting to be discovered and implemented? When given an acceptable choice, people choose life.

It is important to look at issues from a variety of viewpoints in coming up with acceptable solutions. To find a lasting solution to the civil strife a problem solver needs to understand both the rebels and the heart and motivation of those that refused to pick up a weapon. The *Returnees* had abandoned their close knit community and the social norms that guided it. For those that stayed home it was not easy to simply embrace those that inflicted additional suffering to their families.

A Case for Restorative Justice

Returnees were justifiably afraid of retribution on returning. Massimo realized this problem and offered a solution based on the concept of restorative justice. Only a year before in Lira rebels were periodically raiding the community and in one case they killed a local police officer. The Returnees would need to do more than simply say they were sorry for their past actions. The Returnees had to pay a price for their crimes but that price had to be one that would not add to the burden of resentment, violence and hatred.

Massimo had an ingenious plan that he proposed to Michael. "Since your group killed a policeman who was doing his job you will need to do something for the police. Why don't you build an extension to the overcrowded police station for they really need one? This is a way you can show the police and the community that you really are sorry and you want to be a part of society again."

To heal a broken heart is a key to healing a broken world. A time tested principle essential in building lasting peace is very simple. Reconcile with your former enemies by shedding your tears and sweat for their sake. In doing this as individuals, as families and as communities we will create a healing force that will help us avoid bloodshed. We will be true peacemakers.

Massimo really did have the right idea. Yet beyond the idea, he was a person who spent his life living out the ideals that feed the hope of peace. In a sense, his dynamic and creative energy was the substance of peace in action.