

Bishops' Appeal visit to Burundi and Rwanda

By Lydia Monds

The plane doors opened and I was hit with a weighted air, fragranced with smells of burning charcoal and heated to 27 degrees.

On the first sight of red soil and banana trees backing the runway, the realisation finally sank in – the Irish floods of the previous day were a distant memory and I was back in breathtaking East Africa.

Ten days later I stood in Trinity College at a class reunion, barely able to come to terms with the dream of weaving through the multitude of hills, the multitude of welcomes and the multitude of personal stories of hard work and hope scattered throughout Burundi and Rwanda.

The day before, I had been sitting on a small wooden bench outside a farmer's modest clay brick home in Rwanda, listening as she told the story of providing her family with meat twice a month, instead of the standard twice a year.

Maria, who farmed fish, rabbits and rotating crops of cabbages and beans, was the vice-president of a farming co-operative. With cash that the group received, they were able to set up a bank account and anyone in the group could apply for a loan if money was needed for home repairs or a child's education. Before, access to cash was simply impossible, as no farmer would be deemed eligible for a bank loan. Apart from this, every family in the co-operative had health insurance and a cow.

Five years ago, I had visited a student who lived in a nearby community. His mother had jaundice and their roof had caved in. They were struggling with both raising funds and with deciding whether they spent those funds on medicine for their mother or repairs to their house as they were forced to live in a shed with their animals.

Issues such as these, which can leave a family destitute due to the unforeseen that life inevitably throws at us all, were covered for Maria and her colleagues thanks to access to money and family health coverage.

Added to this, when her cow calved, the cow was given to another family in the community and that paid off the cost of the animal in the form of a revolving loan.

This programme had been set up by the Church's rural development programme and was funded by Bishops' Appeal. They had started with seven cows, and this number had swelled now to forty-two.

The agricultural training they had received meant the crops were more plentiful, more resistant and diversified to combat malnutrition. And Maria's was not the only success story that we encountered, but I am ahead of myself. Let me rewind.

The whirlwind trip that Canon Ian Poulton and I undertook involved assessing ten Bishops' Appeal projects in two countries over nine days. Recounted here are the highlights of what has been achieved and what will be achieved through the generous giving of people in the Church of Ireland to Bishops' Appeal and through the hard work and dedication of people in Burundi and Rwanda to maximise that funding. But my words will never do this partnership true justice. This can be but a glimpse of the lives that are being empowered and blessed through our Church of Ireland/East Africa links.

In Bujumbura, Burundi, Viola sells cassava flour at a local roadside market. This has been made possible through a Bishops' Appeal funded YWCA savings and credit group where women, who are single mothers or widows, can receive training in business management and basic accountancy and can apply for funds to start and expand their businesses.

Viola's business has already proved sustainable and with the profit she has carried out home repairs and paid for shoes and copybooks so that she can send her children to school.

In a remote village in Rutana, we were inspired by the work of the Mothers' Union, which we will be supporting in 2012. Not content with running 700 women's literacy and development programmes throughout the country, the Mothers' Union in Burundi has trained groups in the Sudan and the Congo in implementing this innovative methodology.

The group that we visited consisted of 40 adults, many of whom were women with babies on their backs and many more with husbands at their sides, interested in what their wives were learning at these classes.

The facilitation is provided on the basis that these people are not ignorant; they have huge reservoirs of life experience and so they start with what they know.

This particular class focused on gender equality and the discussion was thought provoking; it brought into play people's concerns that their daughters receive an education, balanced with fears that their traditions would be lost if males and females deviated from their traditional roles.

Once it had been adequately discussed, the literacy class started. We watched in amazement as these people, who had never been to school, identified vowels and consonants in the word 'gender', made sounds from different letters, made words from different sounds and made sentences from different words.

The group was so engaged in the process. Indeed, the classes are so successful that once someone can read a newspaper, they can be accredited and move into the numeracy and accountancy group, which works similarly to that of the YWCA.

Across the border in Rwanda, and in a small village called Tambwe, we were introduced to members of another farming co-operative who were close to their goal of producing 20,000 pineapples.

The Diocese agrees to buy a certain amount of their crop every season, which provides the main raw material in the pineapple juice and jam industry. As we sat and chatted with the farmers who were taking a break from harvesting, we learnt that they have contributed hugely to their local community.

They have built three houses for child-headed families and they have renovated two homes in the community. The president of the co-operative, Guillaume, brought us to his home and showed us the sewing machine he has been able to buy for his daughter so that she could have the opportunity to work and earn money.

It was obvious that the money they received to support their pineapple growing didn't just stop with them, but produced a ripple effect in their families, broadening out to their communities and expanding to include the most marginalized and forgotten members of Rwandese society.

Having spent time in the homes of young people who had grown up destitute because their parents were dead or in prison, we knew the weight of the calling to take responsibility for those who were most vulnerable. Still, when you have so little yourself, it seems strange happily to sacrifice the fruits of your labour to care for others, but this was a self-established remit of this co-operative.

The Bishops' Appeal project in Rwanda for 2012 involves diversifying pineapple growing into other fruits and providing training for farmers in agriculture and agronomy which they can take back and implement in their own communities and co-operatives.

With the re-establishing of relationship and the strengthening of communication, we returned home so aware of the potential for impact and change.

The Maria's and Viola's, women's literacy classes and pineapple co-operatives of this world represent the positive and multiplying effects that our contribution is making.

I was struck again and again by the fact that in the face of every student, farmer, mother, market seller, and child, there lies the image of God.

We are privileged to play a part in their story.