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The seeds of health

Alongside the calabash, the new community gardens in Kilema, Tanzania, will also be growing sustainable agriculture, nutrition, and some income for the orphans and vulnerable children who are tending the crops. "The gardens are meant to reverse the cycle of malnutrition set off by the HIV/AIDS pandemic," says CACHA nutritionist Catherine Lefebvre.

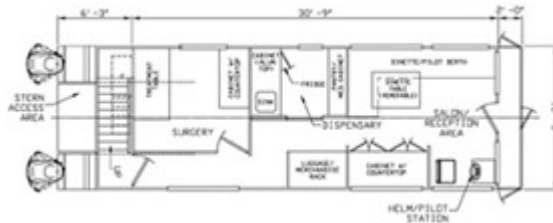


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Healthcare by barge



CACHA volunteer Elizabeth Lavoie is looking forward to 2009 when a medical barge will serve Gabon's remote riverside villages. "The biggest problem in the region is follow-up. The medical barge is intended to bring healthcare to people year-round, making CACHA's intermittent efforts far more effective."

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Local needs, local business

"The orphans and vulnerable children in the Kilema OVC program needed school uniforms, so we decided to help an entrepreneur set up a business to supply them." Winstone Nyange, program coordinator, describes how educational support money was kept in the community in a form of micro-finance.



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CACHA partner receives international award

This fall, Sister Placida Moshia, director of Imani Vocational Training Centre in Tanzania, received one of 13 prizes for creativity in rural life from the Geneva-based non-profit World Women's Summit Foundation (WWSF). The award honours innovation and perseverance, two qualities that define Sister Placida's work to make her school fully self-reliant and sustainable by teaching students to grow and raise their own food.



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The seeds of health

Kilema community gardens provide for growing bodies and minds

The new community gardens in Kilema, Tanzania, will be growing a lot more than beans and calabash this year. Sprouting up among the vines will also be the sustainable by-products of these gardens: good nutrition, healthy bodies, active minds, and some extra income for the orphans and vulnerable children who are tending the crops.

“The gardens are intended to reverse the cycle of malnutrition set off by the HIV/AIDS pandemic,” says CACHA nutritionist Catherine Lefebvre and author of a study of food intake, height and weight of orphans and vulnerable children in the Kilema area.



“If we agree that good nutrition is the foundation for a healthy body and an active mind, these kids need some extra intake if they’re to thrive and benefit from other CACHA programs, such as education.”

Skills gap

HIV/AIDS can have a number of less obvious, and in some cases long-term, side effects. For example, the ill and those caring for them do not have the time nor the energy to tend household crops. This loss of labour means loss of production, which means less food and income for the family. The death or absence of parents can also lead to the collapse of extended family networks and the widespread loss of local knowledge of agro-ecology and farming practices.

So orphans end up with fewer agricultural skills, less food and less income.

The main goal of the community garden project is to reverse that cycle by educating orphans and vulnerable children about how to grow fresh and nutrient-rich food for their own use and, potentially, to provide a sustainable income.

Local food

In her study, Lefebvre’s height and weight measurements revealed, not surprisingly, that many children in the Kilema area are below the third percentile in the World Health Organization’s growth curves. These children tend to be the ones reporting low protein intake: eating beans only once a week, meat a few times a month, and eggs never, for example. Most children also did not eat enough fresh fruit or vegetables.

Based on 2005 numbers, about 38 percent of Tanzanian children suffer from chronic protein energy malnutrition, which is indicative of chronic food insecurity. Other symptoms of food insecurity include vitamin A and iodine deficiency, and anaemia, which affects 66 percent of children and 80 percent of pregnant women. Fresh and readily available food can help reduce the prevalence of these conditions.

Post-harvest losses, or the percentage of food that never reaches the table, are greater in the developing world, ranging from 30 to 80 percent depending on the perishability of the food. Growing food locally will help reduce these losses by eliminating damage due to transportation time and handling, bringing more food to the table.

Many offshoots

But besides good food and some income, the gardens will give the children the experience and the satisfaction of running their own project from seeding to harvesting to selling. Better nutrition will also help the children at school.

“Getting the nutrients they need will help the children learn and get the full benefit of CACHA’s support of education,” says Lefebvre.

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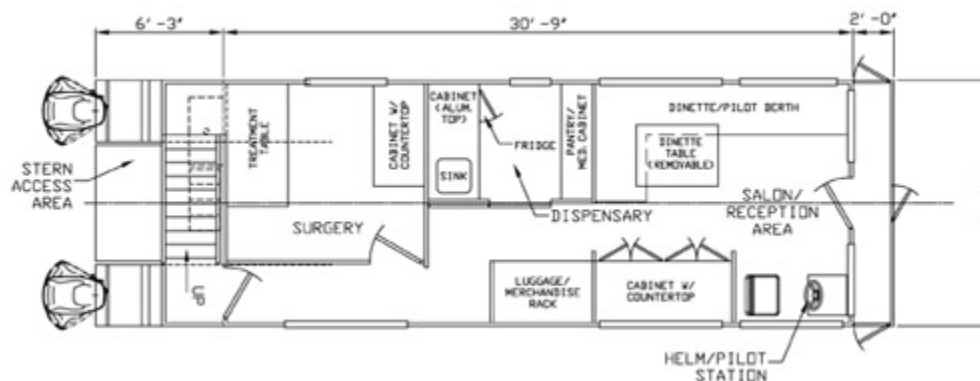


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Healthcare by barge

A Canadian-made floating dispensary will bring better medical services to Gabon's village.



The lush jungle and river-dominated geography of central Africa's Gabon makes people's access to medical services infrequent to say the least. After working for years within the region's constraints, CACHA medical teams have devised and designed a practical, homegrown solution: a Canadian-made barge to bring Gabonese health care professionals and services to the people.

Based on a stainless-steel houseboat hull made by U-Fab Boats in Smiths Falls, Ontario, the barge is a simple design that will contain a dispensary, a blood lab and a surgery for a medical practitioner, a midwife and nurses.

Year-round healthcare

Gabonese staff will operate the barge year-round, not just during CACHA medical missions. This aligns with co-founder Don Kilby's philosophy that CACHA should initiate and participate in projects, not control them.

"The biggest problem in the region is follow-up," says CACHA volunteer Elizabeth Lavoie. "Our medical caravan visits the villages by boat once a year. We will treat people with diabetes or other chronic conditions that require ongoing monitoring, but the rest of the year they have no regular check-ups."

"The medical barge is intended to bring healthcare to people year-round, making our intermittent efforts far more effective."

For Gabonese villagers, travel to larger centres is largely impossible, mainly because of expense, but also due to the dangers of travel by night on the open water and the hazards of wind and current.

Simple, elegant solution

Besides bringing regular healthcare services to the region, the barge will have other parallel benefits.

"It's a simple, elegant solution to a number of problems," says Lavoie.

The Gabonese government has earmarked \$700,000 in its health budget for refurbishing the medical compound at the barge's launch point. Getting the barge into operation will encourage the full and appropriate investment of that money in the compound, which is in a state of disrepair.

CACHA volunteer and chiropractor Pat Faloon, one of the coordinators of the program, feels that another side benefit is an economic one for Canada.

Positive return

"The floating dispensary is a relatively small, simple effort compared with some potentially huge positive returns," he says. "The barge will bring immediate and much needed medical services. It will encourage Gabonese budget allocations to get on the ground. And it is providing business for a Canadian company now and, potentially, for years to come."

The future business Faloon is referring to is Gabon's interest in replicating this pilot project—if it proves successful—in eight to 12 other similar regions.

Functional design

The 30-foot-long, 12-foot-wide stainless steel pontoon boat has a low draft for getting into shallow water, solar panels for electricity, a fridge for transporting samples, and a rooftop area for staff to sleep if they need to. Total cost for building, transporting and re-assembling in Gabon will be \$125,000. At the time of writing, the design is complete and production is underway, on schedule for shipping in the first quarter of 2009.

CACHA will pay the salary of the boat's pilot, Dieudonne (Alan) Aleka from Gabon. He is presently training at University of Ottawa Health Services, so that he can double as a nursing assistant. He will develop skills specifically in the areas of prenatal care, child immunization, patient triage and HIV rapid testing.

CACHA will hire the barge's other medical staff and pay salaries for two years, while Gabon will cover the costs of fuel and maintenance.

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Local needs, local business

Hiring Kilema seamstresses keeps school uniform money in the community

Linda from Nganjoni, Tanzania, has sewn shirts, shorts and skirts for over 50 orphans and vulnerable children over the last three months. Through this work, she was able to pay back the loan for her sewing machine and the space she has rented for her new business.

Linda is part of a new Kilema Hospital OVC program project, supported by CACHA, to keep support money within the Kilema community by hiring vulnerable people in the community to provide program necessities.



"The orphans and vulnerable children in the Kilema Hospital OVC program needed school uniforms," says Winstone Nyange, the OVC program coordinator. "Instead of the more common practice of paying established businesses in the city for these basics, we decided to keep the money in the community and help vulnerable people here."

In her early thirties, Linda lives with her elderly mother and her one-year-old baby girl in Kilema.

"Their house is in rough shape and the land very dry, making it hard to grow food," says Nyange. "With Linda in a wheelchair, the women were having difficulty finding a source of household income."

Building skills in the community

Linda studied sewing at Tangeru, a vocational school for the disabled, in which the teachers praised Linda for her sewing skills.

Another person making uniforms for the program is Esuvath, a teacher in the Kilema Parish vocational school. Esuvath's vulnerable students are also helping make the uniforms and earn a little income. Some of those students happen to be those supported by the Kilema OVC program.

"This project benefits the community in many ways," says CACHA volunteer Rainer Tan. "Local people are earning income and becoming self-sufficient. Linda has paid for the bulk of her business infrastructure with the income from her first customer—the Kilema Hospital OVC program! And the school children have uniforms."

Escaping the poverty trap

Micro-credit as a way of helping people escape the cycle of poverty is being used in developing countries around the world.

"Micro-credit is not charity," says Winstone Nyange. "This project, while not strictly micro-finance—because Linda paid back the cost of her sewing machine through goods—is a good example of sustainable help that does not depend on anybody after the initial help is given."

CACHA has also started a true micro-credit project with the Tumaini People Living with HIV/AIDS group at Kilema Hospital. Fifteen people already have loans and the project appears promising.

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CACHA partner receives international award

Imani vocational school director Sister Placida honoured for innovation and perseverance

On October 15th, 2008 Sister Placida Mosha, director of Imani Vocational Training Centre ("Imani") in Tanzania, received one of 13 Prizes for Women's Creativity in Rural Life. The award has been given annually since 1994 by the Geneva-based non-profit World Women's Summit Foundation (WWSF), and honours creativity and perseverance in improving rural life. Sister Placida is but one of the many exceptional Africans with whom CACHA is fortunate to collaborate.



Humble Beginnings

One of twelve children born to farming peasants in a northern Tanzanian village near Mt. Kilimanjaro, Sister Placida Mosha became a nun of the Order of Our Lady of Kilimanjaro in 1968. Since that time she has been devoted to serving Tanzania's rural poor, deciding to make the lack of access to education and the dependence on subsistence farming central to her life's work.

The Vision

Sister Placida's organization is a vocational training school that teaches adolescents trades such as carpentry, brick-laying, tailoring, embroidery and electrical installation. While about a third of its 100 students are disabled, there is another reason why Imani is no ordinary vocational training school. The school is Sister Placida's ongoing attempt to realize her unique vision of a fully self-reliant and sustainable organization. Her strategy is to discover and implement ever more innovative food- and income generating projects that are appropriate to the local context.

Implementation

The first such innovation Sister Placida desired was a drip-irrigation system in her garden. Tired of low vegetable yields, wasted water and hours watering the garden by hand with a hose, she purchased the materials required to drip-irrigate her 1000 square meter vegetable garden. A week later she oversaw installation of the system, enabling her to drastically improve the diet that her students receive while reducing the school's monthly water consumption. From lettuce to tomatoes, onions to carrots, the vegetables grew as never before.

While visiting another organization, Sister Placida discovered it is possible to essentially dig a hole, cover the bottom with special soil, fill it with water and small tilapia fish, and watch them grow. Of course the reality is somewhat more complicated than this, but not complicated enough to stop Sister Placida from digging herself a fish pond the very next week. Four months later over 500 large tilapia fish were harvested by the students, leaving the small fish in the pond to continue growing and reproducing.

In addition to drip irrigating her garden and harvesting fish Sister Placida also raises pigs, grinds her own corn and fabricates her own unique inter-locking bricks.

Simplicity and Sophistication

Each of Sister Placida's projects is innovative unto itself, but it is not until one examines the inter-connections between them that one discovers the true genius of her approach. Manure from the pigs is used to fertilize the garden, and also to coat the bottom of the fish pond. Scraps from the vegetable garden, ground-up fish bones and the shells from corn kernels are fed to the pigs. Chippings from her carpentry program are used as the fuel to burn the inter-locking bricks in the kiln, which are in turn used to build her classrooms. In fact, almost every waste product generated by the individual project components is used as an input to another component. The result is a system that operates at a high level of efficiency and productivity, all while reducing the impact on the environment. Her approach is creative rural systems design at its finest.

A catalyst for development

Sister Placida is as good at sharing good ideas as she is at adopting them. She frequently gives tours of her school to visitors, both local and foreign, sharing her insight into sustainable organization development and encouraging others to follow this path. Recently Sister Placida helped a group of volunteer Canadians from the Rotary Club dig a fish pond similar to hers at another nearby school: her vision is not only to create a sustainable and self-reliant organization, but to help others to do the same. At 64 years old Sister Placida remains dedicated to improving the lives of Tanzania's rural poor, an inspiring example of CACHA's fine overseas partners.

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