



Operation sustainability

Imani documentary showcases a Tanzanian model

Ottawa teacher Greg John filmed Operation Imani while working for CACHA in Tanzania. The documentary follows projects at Imani, a vocational school pursuing self-sustaining operation. Last summer the film screened across Canada. Here we speak with the filmmaker about Imani, lasting aid, and viewer response to this project.

The trailer for Operation Imani states that despite half a trillion dollars in aid money over 50 years, Africa has grown poorer. Why do you think this is?

Outside of corruption and bureaucracy, which we can't influence, I think the main reason is that much of the money making it to the ground isn't spent in a way that supports needs in the long term. And I think this is something we can influence.

Some controversial views advocate slowing financial aid to the third world because it doesn't create jobs.¹ What alternative does the Imani model propose?

When we visit third world countries, we see people without shoes, and we want to get them shoes. We don't think about how they'll get another pair when the first wears out. Humanitarian aid brings shoes, but development aid gives people what they need to make shoes, or helps them start a shoe-making business. This is the model that Imani proposes.

What is Imani?

Imani is a vocational training school near Mt. Kilimanjaro with a unique, business-focussed, self-sustaining approach to education. All practical academic programs—carpentry, tailoring, knitting, electrical—have a business aspect built into them. Students don't just learn carpentry, they also create wood products, then market and sell them. The goal is to generate enough money to support the program, and therefore the school.

Is Imani self-sufficient right now?

Because government funding is tiny, CACHA supports the school through donor investments, probably \$40,000 over the past few years. Imani is working toward self-sufficiency, slowly but surely, by selling what they make and working hard at onsite projects. They grow a wide variety of food not typically grown in the area. The garden's drip irrigation system saves water and ensures good yields. They raise and harvest tilapia in dug fishponds. They use an innovative mould to make their own interlocking bricks that can be stacked without mortar. They are building up a pig herd. All of these projects generate income, contribute to school growth and student nutrition, and teach students skills beyond their vocation that they can apply to their own village or land.

Where do all of these ideas come from?

Sister Placida Mocha, who is Imani's director, finds projects that are working elsewhere and brings them back to the school. She's 65 years old and a firecracker. She has a sophisticated view of what it means to be sustainable, and speaks frankly. At one point she says, metaphorically, that she wants to cut off her hand and not reach out like a beggar anymore.

Does Sister Placida have any new projects in the works?

If she were here she'd give you the list! She's thinking of a more mechanized brick-making mould, a



chicken house, dairy cows, bee-keeping, and fruit drying machines to preserve the mounds of mangoes, papayas, and avocados that can go to waste during the short harvest season.

When Operation Imani screened across Canada, how did audiences respond?

Overall response was very positive. People seemed to agree with the notion of going beyond meeting immediate needs. Most had never seen a project as well-thought out as Imani and spearheaded by local people through sharing of good ideas. This is what I wanted to show people.

What was the most pivotal moment in the film for you?

I loved the scene with the enthusiastic deaf tailoring students showing off their very well-made clothing. It shows another reason Imani is so special: about a third of all students are disabled. In Tanzania, disabled people generally have a hard life and rarely get the opportunity to gain the skills and education to improve their lives. The school gives them these skills.

Which part of your film did audiences connect most with?

People particularly liked the chapter on how school projects use waste outputs as useful inputs to other projects. For example, they spread pig manure on the fishpond to encourage algae growth for fish food. They burn husks from the maize mill and wood chips from the carpentry shop during brick firing. They spread the resulting ash on the garden to fertilize plants and reduce soil acidity. This closed system is a real demonstration for westerners of how to reduce waste. It's one of the most impressive things about the school.

Did your film spark any debate or inspire people to do more than just donate?

Some wondered whether the surrounding community could afford Imani's products. Although the area is very poor, products like fish and pigs, clothing, stools and chairs, bricks, and window security grills are all needed and within many people's reach. People also wondered if students had access to microfinance after they graduated. CACHA is actually pursuing this in Tanzania.

Through the screenings, did you meet people involved in similar projects?

Yes, and hearing these stories really reinforced another of the film's messages. In both Canada and Tanzania, we are all doing our own thing and reinventing the wheel. By sharing ideas, we can eliminate the projects that don't work and propagate those that do.

You are donating all proceeds to Imani. What have you raised?

After theatre rental costs, the film has raised \$14,000 so far.

How can people see this film?

Order a copy from www.operationimani.com or check for screenings in your area.

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