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Hastings to Africa

Solving a problem



Submitted photo

Ray Menard celebrates outside a church in Ilambilole, Tanzania, after hours of planning and discussion that resulted in a five-year plan from the villagers to start a cooperative corn-growing business, and begin to put an end to hunger there.

Local man seeks to help Africans not by giving handouts, but asking for solutions

When Hastings resident Ray Menard met with representatives from various aid organizations in Africa and told them he was planning to go into villages and ask farmers for ideas about how they could help solve the hunger problem, they told him he was wasting his time.

“They said long-term thinking for them is next week,” Menard said.

But he was not to be deterred, and it turns out the strategy he employed resulted in some great ideas, the start of what could become several profitable businesses, and a plan to end hunger

in a village in Tanzania that could be duplicated across the country and developing world.

Last week the Star Gazette highlighted Menard’s non-profit organization, Cheetah Development, and the problems he identified during a recent trip to Tanzania. He found the “food value chain,” or the process of getting food from a farm, to a processor, and onto the shelves of a store, is broken in several ways. He saw high levels of production at small farms, but not enough food was making it to the processing plants, and much of it was going to waste. One problem he saw was a lack

of small businesses, which are the building blocks for a stable and successful economy and should make up the food value chain. Menard identified three goals he thinks can help bring about new business opportunities and fight hunger at the same time: unite farmers, preserve food and add value to the food that’s being produced.

Unity brings prosperity

One of the most inspiring and revealing stories Menard came away from his trip with occurred in the village of Ilambilole,

Tanzania, when a group of people came up with a plan to rid their village of hunger.

Menard chose to do something westerners rarely do – go into a village and ask regular people for business ideas that would create solutions to problems they’re facing. The reason for doing so was simple.

“If it wasn’t their idea, it wouldn’t succeed,” Menard said. “People work harder on things they believe in.”

In his quest to seek out farmers

AFRICA FROM PAGE 1A

Menard seeking volunteers, investors



Submitted photo

Ray Menard stands at the front of a church in Ilambilole, Tanzania, where villagers put together a five-year plan to start a cooperative corn-growing business. Menard hopes the strategy he employed in Ilambilole, of talking to real people in villages and asking them for ideas, can be successfully replicated throughout the developing world.

for ideas, Menard went to Ilambilole, which his church in Hastings, Our Saviour's Lutheran Church, has had a relationship with for nearly 20 years. He felt the church's association would give him some credibility, and he'd previously spent a week in the village and gotten to know some people.

"I was counting on these small advantages to create a little more trust and help to move the dialogue along faster," Menard wrote in a report entitled "Field to Table: Following the Food Value Chain to Explain the Problem of Persistent Hunger."

A pastor Menard knew helped him organize a meeting of about 20 church leaders following a Sunday service. Ilambilole is a village of about 4,000 people and for about 95 percent of them, farming is their sole source of income.

Once introductions were out of the way, it was time to get down to business. After overcoming some hesitancy on the part of the villagers to share their ideas, it was clear none of the ideas they presented fit the Cheetah Development model of investment. Everyone had ideas that would have benefited themselves or their family, but no one had ideas for how to help the entire village, and few ideas seemed like they'd be profitable or sustainable.

Menard said he would return to Ilambilole, but that the villagers would have to prepare for his next visit, and the entire village would have to be represented, not just members of the church. Then he let the other shoe drop.

"Not one person will ever be given money by Cheetah," Menard told the group. "I let that sink in. No one here will receive an investment from Cheetah. It is not fair. One of you wanted me to buy you a tractor, plows, and combine. With this, you could farm for the entire village and so everyone else will lose their job. You think that you will become

rich. You are wrong. If everyone loses their job, then no one can buy the food from your farm ... We cannot make an investment in each family. And we will not choose a few of you to be rich while others stay poor.

"So you need to think differently. We want to invest in projects that will help the entire village. These projects must make money because we require the investment to be paid back. Between now and next week, you need to find ideas like this. We have given you some examples. You know your village. What will work?"

One week passed, and Menard returned to Ilambilole. He said he didn't know what to expect at the meeting.

When he arrived, he saw there were between 50 and 75 people in attendance at the church, but again, people were unwilling to share their ideas. Menard said there was clearly a lack of trust on the part of the villagers.

"Finally I stand and state with absolute clarity, I am not an aid organization. I am not a pastor. I am not a politician. I am a business man. I am here to make money. We will only invest if we believe that we can make money. Any organization that we invest in will operate transparently. We will have no secrets. We will not tolerate corruption. We will partner with the (University of Tumaini) to help with management," Menard said.

That's when the flood gates opened.

The main cash crop in Ilambilole is corn, so it's no surprise the villagers' first, and most popular idea, was to create a corn cooperative that would build a storage facility, operate a mill, and sell directly to food vendors. (Remember, the hunger problem in Ilambilole doesn't come from a lack of production, but a lack of a profitable means to get crops to the people who want to buy them. About 40 percent of the crops

grown across Tanzania rot and are never used or eaten.)

After more brainstorming and voting on their favorite ideas, the most popular were the corn cooperative, a millet-growing operation and granary, a pork cooperative and the production of sunflower oil.

Menard then asked the group if there were a way to combine the four ideas so they would be even more effective. That was somewhat of a foreign concept, Menard said, and it generated a lot of discussion among the group. Menard had an idea of how the ideas might work together, but he wanted the group to think it through.

"So I had the village's largest pig farmer stand and describe his operation in detail," Menard wrote in "Field to Table." "He has 70 pigs, is the church treasurer, a trusted and smart young man by the name of Cornelius. Cornelius shared for about 15 minutes about his operation. It turns out that Cornelius feeds his pigs corn millings (the husks that remain after making flour) and sunflower seed cake (left after the oil is pressed out). This was one small fact in a 15 minute presentation.

"It was silent for about a minute. Then simultaneously about three people saw the connection. Corn, sunflowers, and pork are the village's largest outputs. They are all linked together. The excitement was palpable. An adjustment to the plan was made and then presented back to me."

The new plan, put together by the villagers themselves, had four steps:

1. Form a corn-growing cooperative and construct storage building to keep the corn;
2. Take the church's sunflower press and put it into the cooperative. Fix it up and add a sunflower oil filter and proper packaging and sell the oil for profit;
3. When electricity becomes available (expected in Ilambilole in three

years) put in a corn mill. By milling their own corn, two things are accomplished: the value jumps, and more importantly, they get the millings back;

4. In the meantime, work to expand local pork production in an informal way. Once the corn mill is in, become formal about adding the production of pig food (made from the used sunflower seeds and corn millings) to the cooperative and then form a pork cooperative.

Menard asked them how long they thought it would take to get all four parts of the plan up and running, and they responded that it would take about five years.

"Everyone said that villagers could not create a long range plan," Menard said. "They were wrong."

"There was rejoicing, singing, and a few very short speeches," Menard wrote. "It was late, getting dark, and hungry crying children were gathering at the church door. We rushed outside for a picture. The hope was palpable."

Other plans

The story from Ilambilole is just one example of the projects Menard helped initiate while in Africa this summer. Others include starting up a bike factory, getting trucks in the hands of a group of tea growers, starting a group of retail stores that would sell food-canning supplies and teach people canning techniques, expanding a textile mill and helping a small food production company increase its productivity. Behind each idea is a group of Africans who are working toward prosperity for themselves and their village or region.

To learn more about Cheetah Development, and to learn about becoming a volunteer, donor or investor in Cheetah and an actual Tanzanian business, visit Menard's website at www.cheetahdevelopment.org.