



About Kenyan markets, the sugar cane harvest and prisons – a visit to Crossroads Farm

Nairobi {12.09.06} Songhor is a collection of roadside villages in western Kenya, about one and a half hours by car from Lake Victoria. Until about 20 years ago, lions prowled the exceptionally fertile highlands. Only occasionally did European settlers plant sugar cane on farms. Nowadays mankind has taken full possession of the valleys and mountain slopes. Today, too, sugar cane is the preferred crop. And maize, from which the country population prepare their staple dish, Ugalli.



The highlands are called the Nandi Hills

– after the Nandi tribe, who used to wage war on the tribes on the plains from their vantage point in the mountains.

As in the past, agriculture is the people's main source of income. Often it's tiny farms of 4 or 5 acres managed by one family. The harvest from the land goes to a neighbouring sugar cane factory, which the farmers know is supposed to be in poor financial health. Or it is sold on the nearby market. Apart from maize and various vegetables, fruits and chickens, second-hand clothes, pots, pans and sundry household items make up the offerings in huts made of sticks and sometimes covered with plastic sheets. Some – like the shoe seller – simply sell their wares at the side of the road. The potter, who arrived with an old truck and a megaphone, does active marketing. His advertising messages sound out all day to the neighbouring Crossroads Farm. Only at about 4.00 p.m. does heavy rain stop his gush of words – and all other activities at the market.

At Crossroads Farm, too, we take shelter from the torrents under the tin roof of a big shed. The dog cannot deal with the loud drumming of the rain and slinks off to his kennel. The rainfall starting also puts an end to the sugar cane harvest on the farm, which is gathered by hand by a small army. It is the children on the next farm that come out again first when the rain takes a break. They're working on the fields on this Saturday afternoon, planting maize on a field already harvested and ploughed, earning themselves some pocket money in the process.

Two families live on Crossroads Farm and run it together with workers from the surrounding area: The Germans, Thomas und Sylvia Gröninger, and the Kenyans, Reuben and Sabina Gitau, each with their four children. They've lived here on the farm in Songhor for two months. Before that they tilled the farmland for a year operating from neighbouring Tinderet and laid a water supply, fences and the shed equipped with two small apartments. Last year the German prison mission, Gefährdetenhilfe Scheideweg e.V., bought this farm of some 160 acres, whose previous owner largely grew sugar cane. He sold the land to pay for his children to go to university.





The pastoral association from the Rhineland has been visiting the East African republic since 1977. A travel group made the trip about every two years, visiting prisons from Mombasa on the Indian Ocean to Kisumu on Lake Victoria, and supporting the work of prison counsellors with their programme of songs, sketches and life stories. Over the years this created a trustful relationship with the Africa Inland Church, the regional partner for the prison mission in building up the farm. And with every visit grew the challenge to provide permanent and practical aid.

According to official information, about 48,000 people are presently locked up in Kenya's prisons. Critical voices say it may well be twice that number. The prison conditions have improved in recent years, but they are still pretty grim, depending on how far you get away from the capital. Prisoners and ex-convicts are excluded by society. Reuben und Sabine have experienced that.

Reuben was arrested on charges of armed robbery about four years ago, and in the first instance was sentenced to death. His family and his wife's family urged Sabine, who was pregnant with their third child, to divorce him. Sabina refused despite the growing social pressure. When Reuben was cleared on appeal after two years in prison, the social stigma still stuck. He had to look for a year before he found a job as a truck driver. Some 20 to 40 percent of convicts are innocent or locked up for years for petty crimes, says Reuben. His own experience in prison gave the committed Christian the courage to commit himself to prisoners and ex-convicts. With other released prisoners, he formed a discussion group and met them regularly to exchange experiences and pray.

For twenty years before moving to East Africa, Thomas and Sylvia Gröninger took young ex-convicts into their home. Before they married, Thomas spent a year in India and Nepal and visited prisons there too.

Today, Thomas and Reuben apply their experience in building up Crossroads Farm. Thomas is presently managing the construction of the central farmhouse. The foundations and part of the ground floor are already in place. The outside walls are being built in sandstone, which is excavated and shaped locally before being brought to the building site. When the farmhouse is finished in the coming year it will provide a home in a family environment to youngsters released from a neighbouring prison.



Parallel to building the house, an agricultural concept is being developed helped by farmers from the region with their local knowledge, as well as by scientists at the University of Bonn who are working with trial products in the area and bringing in international experience. One field of sugar cane is still being harvested by the previous owner, but the next crop will then belong to the new owners. The first maize crop is drying out in a newly erected barn and the bean harvest was also very successful. But the cucumbers were another story: While they looked very tasty from the outside, insects had devoured the inside. Tomatoes and avocados have been freshly planted near the farmhouse. Banana bushes are planned to follow on one particularly wet piece of land. At the outer boundary of the farm, the land beside the river is especially fertile, but they still need a concept on how to protect their crops from thieves.

The Crossroads Farm has become an employer for many men from the region, including the two night watchmen, who are soon to be joined by a third colleague. Not much happens in Songhor: a brawl now and again, and a kiosk at the edge of the town was cleared out during the night a few weeks ago. One can walk the streets at night without problems. But in Nairobi meanwhile, the situation is different. The German Embassy regularly informs employees of German companies and organizations about the security situation. At night, one should drive along some of the city's streets only with security precautions, and in some places it's best not to go out of the house when it's dark. Criminal gangs make people feel unsafe, and while some petty thieves disappear behind bars



for many years, some of the capital's residents fear that captured murderers bribe their way to freedom the very next day. Statements like 'It would surely be better if the police would shoot them straight away' pass the lips even of people who have chosen to live in Kenya. Overcoming crime not by punishing but by helping is the challenge that Crossroads Farm has set itself in Songhor. The head of the Kenyan prison service will see how the concept looks when he visits Gefährdetenhilfe Scheideweg in Germany at the end of October. "There's still quite a lot to do before we can take in the first youngsters at our

farmhouse in Songhor," says Gefährdetenhilfe chairman Hans-Jürgen Eichblatt. "Above all, we want to recruit volunteers to visit the prisons in the region." Pastors in the surrounding parishes have promised their support in doing that.

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