133. Food For The People

Amid all the unrest and conflict in South Sudan, progress continues in many parts of the country. Thanks to very generous support from Caritas Austria in partnership with Solidarity with South Sudan, our agricultural programme in Riimenze is making a great difference to the ability of the people to feed themselves. During the long years of war, many agricultural skills were lost. Why waste time planting crops when soldiers would come to ravage and loot? How can one sell goods at a local market when they are stolen before market?

Caritas Austria is funding a sustainable farm project developed by Solidarity with South Sudan on 50 hectares of Church land made available by the Tombura-Yambio Diocese in Riimenze, Western Equatoria, South Sudan. This project has grown out of a very successful community farming project conducted by Solidarity member, Sr Rosa Le Thi Bong RNDM, from Vietnam in which she initially helped 40 families develop better food production – planting better crops, harvesting and storage. Sr Rosa has been working in Riimenze for almost seven years, has learned the Azande language and is very well connected with the local people. In shaping the optimal direction for this project, Solidarity has been fortunate to have had ready advice available from Matthias Fettback of Caritas Austria.

Most of the farm has been cleared and a timber post and barbed wire fence erected to mark out clearly the large plot of land. A borehole has been installed that provides access to water for the farm but at least one further borehole will be needed. Sr Rosa has successfully piloted and determined some of the crops that grow well in the area such as green gram, maize and papaya. She has introduced basic food crop processing machinery for maize and cassava grinding and other machines that have greatly assisted the local people in reducing the amount of time taken in the traditional methods of processing raw crops. Sr Rosa has also brought in many beehives, thereby expanding the capacity of the people to produce good quality honey. She has also introduced new life-stock such as pigs. The people have been taught to cultivate using oxen, introduced the area by Sr Rosa as well as small ‘walking tractors’ to help cultivation.

A Nigerian Marist Brother, Br Christian Mbam Nbudisi FMS, is looking after the bookkeeping for this large project but the immediate supervision of the workers and all the labour is being provided by people from the local Azande community. So far we have deliberately not brought in big tractors, backhoes or bulldozers. At this time, it is only ‘small technology’ that is within the reach of the local people. The project remains labour intensive but the wages earned for the labour has injected desperately needed finance into the local community so that the local markets function more effectively. There will be surplus product to market in Yambio and beyond but the key first step in this project is alleviating hunger in the local community, making the whole project sustainable and empowering the people to look after themselves. It is a great model for other local communities to follow.

Much of the ‘extra’ food produced in this project is already purchased, at favourable rates, by the Solidarity Teachers College in Yambio, just 30 kms away, where over 70 students are in residential teacher training. This agricultural project is helping sustain not only the Azande people in Riimenze but the teacher training initiative in Yambio. Solidarity with South Sudan has also begun a kindred project in Wau where most of the produce will help feed the residential students in the Catholic Health Training Institute. More than 90 students are in full-time three year programmes training to become registered nurses or mid-wives. The agricultural projects are literally seeds of hope as the country strides for new stability and a prosperous future.

- Br Bill