Reflection Paper

This past summer I travelled to Kenya to help the RafikiAfrica Foundation with their goat project. Basically, they wanted to pass on some does from their herd that had favorable breeding to members of the women’s group they had started. They also wanted them to milk the goats, which wasn’t a common practice in that area, to increase the protein in their family’s diet. This project is one small piece of the holistic approach they were taking with community development which included the women’s group, a primary school with assisted tuition sponsor program and I did not know what to expect as far as what I would actually be doing or what the leader’s expectations of me were. By the end of the trip I could see how little that actually mattered and expectations are something with which we as Americans are much more preoccupied with than the Africans.

The first week was hard for me because I was given very vague direction and I was still under the assumption that it was my host’s job to extract what they wanted from me or give me some sort of purpose for being in Kenya. People were very friendly and included me from the start but they did not include me as much in the work. Eventually, I got so itchy from not doing anything that I went and asked my hosts, who were very busy with a health clinic they set up nearby, what I should do to help. They told me to go ahead and follow the two farmers where working on the farm. My first job was with a young farmer named Bernard who became one of my best friends during the trip. He pretended to not know English for a while and named each of the plants that we were gathering for forage for the goats in Luo. This was intimidating at first but then he began imitating my accent which lightened the mood considerably.

After the ice was broken the work really started. We had to dig banana holes, napier trenches, mound sweet potatoes and then propagate all of them using cuttings. The previous year’s drought had killed everything except for the mango trees so there was so much work to do. In the mean time I also helped Patrick, who was really knowledgeable in both agroforestry and construction on designing a paddock for the 9 does and two bucks they had at the farm. It was a slow tedious process to get the materials to build so while we waited we drew out ideas for the raised goat houses we were going to build for the women, hen houses and a goat/layer combination renovation that would utilize the space under the raised platform. I am excited about that design but they were convinced that it wouldn’t work because of the possibility of the hens getting peed on. I always ended the day very tired and I was told halfway through my stay that all the Africans were surprised that I could work as well as them. I respected their knowledge and they respected my ability to work.

The African farmers were some of the best working companions too because they were always talking and had such good senses of humor. Once I killed a toad while hoeing and we spent the next hour creating a narrative on how the toad’s family was going to take me to toad court and ended with me on the run and finally on trial at the toad Hague. When we were having a discussion about the Somali pirates Bernard suggested that if I should ever lose my passport a good way to get back to the US would be to become a white pirate and then get deported back to the US. Even John, who spoke English
about as well as I spoke Luo, had a good laugh watching me imitate them hacking off the clay off my boots with the dull end of my machete. Communication without words with the Massai and John was much easier than I thought it would be. That said I wish I had been able to take a couple years of Swahili before I went but I don’t think that it would have affected my trip to a large degree.

While all this work was going on another task that I began to undertake was completing the heifer international curriculum for goat care that I was given beforehand. Patrick loved that book. He was so impressed with the information and how it was presented. He insisted on reading it beforehand and then running through the basics before the lesson and then co-teaching it in Luo and some English for the women. None of this he was asked to do by anyone and it made it really nice for me because I got to act out all the techniques while he did most of the talking. It turned out being pretty effective and sometimes entertaining for the women and they started showing up early. They especially enjoyed the hoof trimming demonstrations and the heat inducing techniques thanks to Osama (the buck) acting his part perfectly. The forage portion was difficult to convince them of, however, and for a week or two they said it was impossible to ask them to do these things. At the end of it all though Rosemary, who was a leader to many of the women, and her husband collected all the necessary materials for a zero grazing goat house and I got to see the post holes sunk before I left.

In all the experiences that I had in Kenya I realized that I really can only be effective in two ways: bringing information in a tangible form such as a book from another source for them to interpret and encourage them in what they are already doing. There is really not much that I know that is really useful to them. They know better than I ever will how to be successful as a farmer in Kenya and I did the majority of the learning in that area. They learned why iodine is better than bleach for a teat dip and how to trim goats feet and I learned how to grow bananas, trim mangos and with what disease one of our does caught among countless other things. The problem, I believe, was they were convinced that they couldn’t do it on their own. Whether or not foreign aid hotspots are a factor needs to be determined. They still have more tools to build the production than they had in the colonial era and now with ownership. More research needs to be done on why certain areas are prone to this issue before we can be effective at getting them to utilize “better” ag practices.