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Helping to bring new hope to Africa's 'sleeping giant'

**RICHARD
BACON**



For 50 years Voluntary Service Overseas, the world's leading independent international development organisation, has placed people from a wide variety of backgrounds – doctors, water engineers, teachers and, as it turns out, parliamentarians – to work as volunteers across the developing world. Earlier in the summer I got the call.

VSO knew that I was an MP from a very agricultural constituency and wanted me to work in Tanzania with a group whose mission is to build a stronger voice for farming, particularly for the smallholders who comprise 80pc of the population.

Given that my wife Victoria and her twin sister had just launched a new charity, Elizabeth's Legacy of Hope, whose first project is helping limbless children in western Tanzania, I could hardly say no. The plans to clear out the garage went on the backburner as I headed for the hot and dusty capital of Dar es Salaam to report for work at ANSAF, the Agricultural Non State Actors' Forum. ANSAF is a new representative body which aims to secure a bigger voice for farming. It seeks to hold the government to its promises in the farming sector.

The World Bank has called Tanzania the "sleeping giant" of world agriculture. The country is twice the size of France and it has one sixth of the world's fresh water, mostly in the Great Lakes region in the west.

In large parts of country, they say you can throw almost anything in the ground and it will grow, although much high-grade land is unused. The total area of agricultural land classified as 'prime' or 'high/medium potential' for commercial agriculture exceeds the entire area of agricultural land in western Europe.

Crops include maize, rice, wheat, coffee, tea, cotton, cashews, cloves and sisal, as well as fruit and vegetables. Africa could be a major net exporter of food and Tanzania one of the biggest players, but imports are growing and the huge potential remains untapped.

To grasp why, one must understand the agricultural legacy of Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president.

Revered worldwide as one of the giants of the African independence movement, the devoutly Catholic Nyerere was a man of austere and unostentatious personal habits who was the Father of the Nation. He was responsible for the spread of Swahili as the national language (Tanzania has over 120 tribal languages), the



BASIC SUPPLY SYSTEM: Tanzania has one sixth of the world's fresh water but irrigation methods are often rudimentary.

growth of national identity and the lack of the tribal strife which has hit some of Tanzania's neighbours.

Nyerere exerted enormous moral authority over the country and there have even been moves to beatify him, an important step towards sainthood. But as part of his vision of African socialism, he introduced the collectivisation of farming. Millions of peasants were moved and forced to give up their land. Predictably, this caused agricultural output to plummet.

By 1979, collectivised villages containing 90pc of the rural population produced 5pc of the national agricultural output. Tanzania went from being the largest exporter of agricultural products in Africa to the largest importer, while depending on foreign aid more than any other African country.

As Nyerere's obituary in The Guardian noted: "It was a measure of Nyerere's international prestige that the failure of this fundamental policy at home in no way dented his global standing." But the result is a country which still has much to do to fulfil its enormous agricultural potential.

There has been some good news. Recent governments have adopted a more market-friendly posture and President Jakaya Kikwete's blueprint for a green revolution, Kilimo Kwanza (which means 'Agriculture First') is beginning to make progress. But the challenges are formidable.

There is another problem. How does one fully embed the disciplines of commercial agriculture, with its focus on quality control, economies of scale and productivity, while genuinely partnering with the 80pc of the population who are subsistence farmers? No policy will work in the



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long term if it doesn't do this. One fascinating success story, the Kitani enterprise in Tanga, on Tanzania's east coast, offers a way to square this circle. Kitani (the word means 'sisal' in Swahili) took over the assets of the Tanzanian Sisal Authority, kept the old sisal factories in a central holding company, and gave the land to subsistence farmers in 15-acre plots while inviting them to produce sisal for its factories as so-called "outgrowers".

Those who took up the offer are now prospering, while sceptics who held back are now clamouring for more land to grow sisal, or even working as labourers on their more enterprising neighbours' housebuilding projects.

Sisal is one of the world's most extraordinary crops. It is a fibrous material which can be used to make everything from ropes and carpets to tea bags, and it is now being used in car manufacturing and even in the aerospace industry, due to its lightness, strength and durability. The waste products can be used to produce biofuel. Tanzania was once a larger sisal producer than the next 16 countries combined and it is now intent on reclaiming a leading position in this market.

In 1960 Tanzania and South Korea had the same GDP per head. Now South Korea has become a rich First World country. Tanzania could do the same. If so, it will start with successful agriculture.

Salum Shamte, one of Kitani's founders and also the chairman of the Agricultural Council of Tanzania put it simply: "It is time for the agricultural sleeping giant to awake."

■ Tomorrow, at 1.35pm The Politics Show on BBC1 will include a report on Victoria and Richard Bacon's visit to Tanzania.

NICK HAVERSON
AKA BRAT MINOR



Nothing like peace if you bring your own TV

Last week I told how Catherine and I set off on holiday, arriving at a stop-over campsite with just one sleeping bag – and guess who bagged it. Well, having survived the night under a picnic blanket I packed up our tent and we headed off on the second leg of our camping trip to the Scottish Highlands.

We carried on north for what seemed like days, finally arriving at a peaceful campsite in the middle of nowhere. It was surrounded by mountains and forestry, a truly tranquil place.

Luckily we had been assigned a pitch fairly close to the shower and toilet block. After the long drive I decided to check it out. It was so clean I believe even Mrs H would have been suitably impressed. Upon exiting this cabin of cleanliness I noticed a few gentlemen in kilts giving me some very strange looks. Assuming they'd never seen an Englishman before I carried on back to the car. We pitched our tent, and out came the essentials one must bring on a camping trip including Catherine's six pairs of shoes, various touch-screen devices, and a table cloth which Catherine put over a nearby picnic bench.

Later that evening after a hearty meal of bread and generic meat from a tin, I headed back to the toilet block. As I approached the same entrance I had used earlier a woman was just exiting. She stopped dead in her tracks as I tried to walk past. She had the look in her eyes like that of a wildebeest that's just spotted a lion in the bushes. As she started to speak I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach. I turned and spotted the sign cleverly hidden right next to the door: "Um, the Gents is around the other side," she said.

Not only had I attempted to push past a woman to get into the ladies' toilets but earlier in the day I'd actually used them in front of a party of kilts and booted Scots. I quickly apologised for my error and scurried to the other side of the building aware that I was now going to be known as the site delinquent.

We decided we couldn't leave the Highlands without climbing Ben Nevis so on our penultimate day we set off. The visitors' centre informed us it would take seven hours to climb up and down. Nine hours later we'd succeeded, having been overtaken by pretty much everyone in Scotland including small children and a German in his seventies who ran past us on the way up and then stopped on his way back down to give us some much appreciated tips before jogging on.

On arrival back at camp we found two gigantic motor homes not far from our pitch. They had large awnings attached to the sides and we couldn't help but sneakily peer in, like children at a sweetshop window. Contained within was a living room most would envy including a large plasma TV and Hi-Fi.

As we dropped off to sleep, the occupants of the two motor homes started partying. Now, these were clearly fun people and the rest of the campsite needed to know this so they treated us to some quite excellent music.

The next morning we were awoken by loud bursts of laughter from our new neighbours' TV. I was tempted to inquire as to the model of this television as the volume really could go exceptionally loud – but I thought it better not to disturb them so early in the morning.

As we packed up to leave a very friendly fellow strolled past and we indulged in a polite exchange of notes about our travels. As he departed he enthused: "We love it here, it's so peaceful."

He then proceeded to walk under the large awning – and switch on his plasma TV.