

More Than a Helping Hand

In the spirit of sharing, Heifer Project International (HPI) makes available the tools to empower agricultural communities around the globe.

by Ed Haag



Members of the agricultural community have always taken pride in their willingness to lend a helping hand to fellow farmers and ranchers in their neighborhood. Now, thanks to Heifer Project International (HPI), that hand and that neighborhood extend around the world.

“HPI allows us to share our agricultural vision with those beyond our borders,” says Terry Wollen, large animal veterinarian and the organization’s director of animal well-being. “It is dedicated to working with rural communities to end hunger and poverty while caring for the earth.”

This is a commitment that the nonprofit organization’s staff and membership have always taken seriously, as evidenced by its track record. Since its inception in 1944, HPI has helped nearly 10 million families in more than 60 countries, including the U.S., by providing livestock, plants and trees that have had a direct and positive effect on their daily lives.

HPI’s unique donation program also gives contributors an opportunity to see how their monetary gifts translate into community-transforming agricultural enterprises based on sound stewardship practices. Wollen notes that many of HPI’s contributors are from nonfarm backgrounds. By donating to HPI, they learn what an important role agriculture plays throughout the world and how it can serve as a positive agent of change.

That message is not lost on long-term contributors who share a growing interest in passing the word on to friends and family by making donations in their names during the holiday season. Wollen adds that this gets the word out about HPI’s work and allows those who may have never been on a farm to better understand the positive role livestock production plays around the world.

Tradition of sharing

Considering the principles by which HPI operates, it is no surprise that the organization was started by a farmer from Indiana. Dan West was serving as a relief worker with the Church of the Brethren after the Spanish Civil War when he had an idea that would eventually change the lives of millions.

As he was doling out cups of reconstituted powdered milk to emaciated and broken refugees he asked himself, “Wouldn’t it be better to give these people a cow and the training needed to care for it?” Doing so, he would later explain, could spare them “the indignity of depending on others to feed their children.”

That Christmas, back in Indiana, West announced that he had a special gift for his family — not a material object, but an idea

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► HPI helped Rwanda genocide survivors rebuild their shattered agrarian system.

he planned to turn into a reality. It would be a nonprofit organization that provided livestock and training to struggling families in order to lift themselves out of poverty.

Not long after his pronouncement, West founded Heifers for Relief, and by 1944 his first shipment of heifers left York, Pa., for Puerto Rico.

Since that first shipment, the Heifer organization has been involved in helping restore cattle and dairy herds to a war-ravaged Europe and shipping dairy goats to Japan, pigs to Ecuador and chickens to Korea. It is said that more than half the poultry and eggs consumed in South Korea today are descendants of those chickens shipped by Heifers for Relief in the early 1950s.

Currently HPI is actively pursuing agricultural-based projects in Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and in South and North America.

One cornerstone of all HPI projects is the concept of "passing on the gift." In addition to being trained in animal husbandry by local HPI staff before receiving their livestock, the recipient family must agree to give — in the case of heifers — the first female offspring to another struggling family.

Rebuilding communities

The concept behind HPI's 65-year effort is simple: Make available the agricultural resources best suited to build a sustainable farm community. Experience has proven, however, the path taken to successfully achieve that goal can be complex and intertwined with unresolved histories of inequality and multi-generational deprivation.

Many of the recipient communities are victims of poor resource management, their residents deprived of even a basic subsistence by short-sighted and destructive logging, mining and agricultural practices. The most needy have been left with nothing more than hunger, malnutrition, poverty and despair, their local culture and economic structure in tatters.

Other recipients suffer the legacy of war and violence with its own horrific specters perpetuating an environment of mistrust and discord. For example, in 1994 from April 6 to July 15 between 500,000 and 1 million Rwandans were murdered in a contemporary act of genocide. Another 3 million residents were displaced. The killings were perpetrated by the Hutu militia, members of the country's majority tribe. The victims were Tutsi, a minority tribe, and the Hutu moderates who refused to participate in the atrocities.

Since then the government responsible



►HPI's gifting program played a major role in improving genetics of small beef herds in Mississippi.

for inciting the violence has been overthrown and more than 100,000 of those accused of the crimes have been arrested. But that has been of little consolation for the survivors who witnessed the genocide and are now, themselves, destitute.

'The gift' as healer

What can be done after one person out of 10 has been murdered by his or her neighbor? That was the challenge faced by HPI and its partner organizations when they began their work in Rwanda. Before the genocide and civil war that followed, most of Rwanda's economy was based on agriculture. Centuries of cattle genetics were

wiped out in the conflict.

Coordinating resources with the new Rwandan government and other nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), HPI applied its unique one-on-one working style to the issues at hand. Through these efforts, HPI and its partner organizations were able to help survivors acquire both the livestock necessary to rebuild their agrarian system and a social mechanism that has, through the years, proven invaluable in accelerating the healing process after war.

Jo Luck, HPI's chief executive officer (CEO) and the organization's driving force

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for the last two decades, sees “passing on the gift” as one of HPI’s most powerful social mechanisms for restoring peace and dignity to a violence-torn community. When it comes time to “pass on” a livestock offspring to another struggling family in the community, HPI workers encourage “givers” to give those animals to former enemies as part of an inclusive healing ceremony.

She recounts attending such a ceremony in Rwanda. “Here I am, watching this long line of men and women passing on the gift to each other after they had been at war and been through this horrible genocide,” Luck says. “It is very powerful.”

In January 2008, in recognition of its outstanding work around the world and in particular its accomplishments in Africa, HPI received a four-year \$42.8 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to fund a project to help poor rural farmers in East Africa double their incomes by increasing their production of high-quality raw milk to sell to local production plants.

Tools to rebuild

To help these communities heal and rebuild themselves, HPI enlists an arsenal of field-proven strategies. While collectively broad in scope, all these strategies center on a single act: the entrusting, to a member family of a community, a farm animal that carries

with it the economic aspirations of all.

“The livestock is the catalyst that starts the rebuilding process,” Luck says. “Even before someone in a community receives an animal, members of that community must come together to decide who their leaders are, what their goals are and to identify their shared values.”

Luck points out that most of the communities that HPI serves face a range of problems, all contributing to their deteriorating societal condition.

“It might be water issues or HIV,” she says. “When they are identified, we partner with other NGOs, preferably local, to address those issues.”

After this initial planning stage, what follows is a deliberately inclusive educational process designed to teach community members about the fundamentals of animal husbandry and to help them transition into a more gender-balanced and equitable society.

Luck adds communities that limit the role women play in the educational and decision-making processes reduce their economic potential dramatically.

“What we are talking about is people power,” she says, noting that some traditions, no matter how limiting, are initially defended by the status quo until other options are proven to be better.

She cites, as an example, the insistence of some tribal leaders in Africa to have only

Learning from Katrina

While Heifer Project International (HPI) does focus much of its energy on poverty and inequities abroad, it does not ignore the agricultural needs of communities in Canada and the U.S. It is currently actively supporting more than 100 community projects across the two countries. These range from promoting urban community gardens to helping educate children on food production basics to participating in the more traditional livestock gift programs.

One of HPI’s first major projects in the continental U.S. was initiated in 1955 when 15 Angus heifers were gifted to needy Mississippi families. Roger Jones, a 30-year veteran of the Mississippi Cooperative Extension Service, who now serves as HPI’s South-Central Regional Project Manager, has always been a strong advocate of HPI’s gifting program and the role it plays in improving herd genetics.

“When I was county agent, the weaning

weight on a lot of these animals out of these small farm herds was 325 to 400 pounds,” he says. “Now, through the breeding program that HPI started, we have seen some of those same farmers selling calves from 550 to 600 pounds.”

He adds that this has increased farm income for many of those who need it the most. As a regional manager, Jones oversees projects in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas. When hurricane Katrina struck in 2005, more than half of the farms working with HPI in Mississippi and Louisiana were severely affected.

“We had 18 projects in Louisiana and Mississippi that were devastated,” he says. “We had cattle killed, fences torn up, barns blown away, and fallen trees everywhere.”

Jones recalls the HPI Little Rock headquarters contacting him and immediately asking him what was needed. “That was three weeks before things started flowing into the area,” he says.

the men participate in the livestock training in spite of the fact women often care for the family animals while the husbands are away, working or seeking employment. Luck recalls explaining the economic benefits of wives participating in the training sessions to a polygamous tribal chief.

“After a couple of months he decided to try,” she says. “But the rule was that only one wife from each family could attend, and she had to do handwork during the sessions to show she was being productive.”

Within a year, she adds, that community started to see the economic benefits, and the training groups were opened to all the wives.

“When you are working with other societies, you just have to give them a chance to understand how something will benefit and strengthen their culture,” Luck says, adding that for HPI’s staff it is often a matter of walking that fine line between respecting a community’s cultural mores and providing the best economic options for an improved future.



Author’s Note: For those interested in learning more about Heifer Project International, visit the organization web site, www.heifer.org, or contact Heifer Project International, 1 World Ave., Little Rock, AR/USA 72202; 1-800-422-0474.

“They sent down a load of equipment, as well as providing us with funds to buy chainsaws and other things needed to help us recover.”

Never missing an opportunity to learn from an experience, HPI staff have been documenting and analyzing data on their response to Katrina. “This will help us to better deal with these sort of problems in the future,” Jones says. “That is what Heifer is all about.”

