



Seeds of Change

Alumni Take on Extreme Poverty with Nuru International

How does someone go from Marine Corps Special Operations to farming in Kenya? For Jake Harriman '98, CEO and co-founder of the non-profit Nuru International, the connection came from combat. He saw that as a Marine platoon commander in Force Recon-Special Operations, removing high-level terrorist leaders only led to them being replaced and that the strength of most organizations was with their foot soldiers. Foot soldiers are often there because they have no choice—extreme poverty has led them there. “When I made that connection I decided that perhaps another way for me to fight terrorism would be to get out and fight one of the root causes of the problem instead of just attacking the leadership that would be easily replaced the next day,” said Harriman. *Nuru* (Kiswahili for “light”) was born soon after, an ambitious organization formed not just to fight extreme poverty, but to eradicate it globally, starting in Sub-Saharan Africa.

“I left the special operations field with the desire to do something to help with the issue of poverty,” said Harriman. “Because I lacked the business skills, I went to Stanford Business School just to do that.”

Nuru does not throw bags of rice at problems.

“We focus on five key elements: agriculture, education, water and sanitation, health care and small business development,” said Harriman, beginning with the community of Kuria, Kenya. He hoped 50 to 100 farmers would be interested in the pilot program to be trained in each of these focuses; 500 farmers signed on. Focusing on training people in these five key areas for them to pass on to the community creates empowerment and results, while also knowing Nuru is not a handout but a loan and a source of life-altering information.



Jake and James, an agricultural field manager, walk through a shamba (farm) as they conduct a survey of a local farmer. This research reveals that farmers in Kuria yield only three bags of maize per acre when they could be producing 17 or higher. Nuru is committed to partnering with farmers to increase their yields through a farm input loan program. Photo courtesy of NURU International

“Many can only produce three bags of maize per acre in a season and that only gets them through half the season,” said Harriman. “Through our program, we’re loaning people high-quality fertilizer and seed along with the knowledge of how to use it so they’ll be able to produce 15 to 17 bags per acre. That alone is going to radically change their lives.” This gives farmers the ability to feed their families as they pay back the loan, and next season they will be able to buy their own fertilizer and seed and be self-sufficient.

“They won’t need us anymore,” explained Harriman. “That’s really important.”

While Kuria is a relatively stable area politically, Nuru has plans for the future to move into areas that can easily be labeled as conflict zones: Sierra Leone, DRC, the Congo, Sudan and Afghanistan. With Harriman’s combat background, it is no wonder. But he also knew he needed to start with a successful base which was more readily achieved in a more stable atmosphere. There is also the matter of earning the trust of communities in conflict who have seen their fair share of non-profits come and go, some doing more harm than good. His philosophy on how to best help is quite simple: listen.

“Once you identify the true need by listening to the people there,” explained Harriman, “you can produce unity across cultures and tribes you wouldn’t normally be able to do.” Just by listening to the people and what they actually want and need, like schools and farm equipment, “you can build a layer of trust there instead of going in headstrong.”


After the needs are established, Nuru can call on other non-governmental organizations like One Acre Fund and

Living Water to help with agriculture and drilling to create lasting change, not temporary fixes. “We’re not so worried about getting our name out there as we are getting results happening on the ground,” said Harriman. “The organizations and experts we pull in we vet heavily. We don’t work with organizations that do nothing but handouts—that creates dependency. \$2.3 trillion has been sent into Africa in the past 50 years and they have nothing to show for it. That’s why.”

Honesty and transparency within Nuru is just as important. Gabrielle Blocher ’98, director of research and fellow former Marine (logistics officer), measures the impact on the ground and evaluate performance.

“If we identify an area we’re weak on, we can actually respond quickly and improve the model to the point where it will have greater impact that much more quickly,” said Harriman. So far they must be on the right path. In Kuria, savings clubs groups have been teaching families how to save and plan financially for their future; an Education Advisory Committee has been formed to work with the Ministry of

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Education to improve quality of education; construction has begun on a maternity ward at the local hospital; Living Water International began drilling four deep wells at four primary schools; and planting for the next season began in August.

Once the five basic clean drinking water and medical issues have been addressed, Nuru's work is not over.

"Half of our mission statement is to empower people to lift themselves out of extreme poverty, but the other half is to open the eyes of the developed world to the problem and mobilize them to do something about it." The corn thrived in Kuria this year and farmers saw the actual fruits of their labor.

"It wasn't just an empty happiness that comes from a handout," said Harriman. "It was a deep happiness that comes from the realization that they are changing their lives forever."

To find out more about Nuru, receive updates on the progress of Kuria, read blogs and find ways you can help, visit www.nuruinternational.org. ↕



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