

Tony Ends responds to questions on Senegal - September 2015

What's it like back in Senegal?

I wake up here wondering if I'm in West Africa or Wisconsin. A rooster crows. Sheep bleat. Goats cry to be fed or milked. Even my dear wife Dela is beside me. Am I at Scotch Hill Farm in Brodhead, Wis., or the Hotel Sogui in Senegal's Matam region?

A scorching reflection of early sun is already hitting my eyes. I see it's bouncing off towers of a mosque a block away. Yes, I'm 61. Yes, I'm back where my journey in adult life started at 21. I'm in Africa.

Many things about where I am on this trip as a Farmer to Farmer volunteer are the same as I first saw as a Peace Corps volunteer in 1975. People here are kind. People here are generous. People here want to learn.

Is agriculture the same?

I understand farming today on the edge of the vast Sarah Desert better than I did as a young man on my first teaching venture abroad.

Picture a little boy with a flock of sheep, or a herd of cattle or goats. They are moving across an arid plane of scrub trees. Nowhere in sight, in any direction, is there a structure or dwelling of any kind. The ground is clay and sand. The green on the ground is spare, only around occasional muddy pools, even in this rainy season. It must be 100 degrees.

Where is the boy going? How is he making it out here alone? How can those animals survive?

And this isn't one child, or one strange scene, something abnormal. The picture is repeated over and over on any trip I make out from where I am here in eastern Senegal.

Livestock agriculture is surviving here somehow today despite more than 100 years of colonial powers. Those European people forced cash cropping of single crops on this region along the Senegal River. They cut down all the trees, upset the pastoral balance, and more and more leached out, wore out the thin soils with chemicals.

Even more than 50 years now since nations in Africa like Senegal won independence cannot undo what was done. Just 2 successive years of planting peanuts robbed the soil in Senegal of almost one third of its organic matter.

Yet a herding culture thousands of years older than ours in the United States, keeps miraculously surviving.

How is the volunteer work with Dela – teaching organic vegetable crop production and solar food drying going?

We visited some amazing cooperative gardens of perhaps 5 acres or more in size, being tended and dike irrigated along the Senegal River. We visited some very successful compost making and personal village gardens, too.

Our particular group has about 35 people. They're a core group of probably 135, mostly women farmers. They work very hard. Conditions of the soil, the climate, the weather are very difficult. We're finding this group receptive to what we're teaching. They seem willing and happy to learn.

I can see along the river and the roads we travel that men, who for decades had been risking their lives to find work in Europe and support Senegalese families off migrant wages, seem to be starting to stay home, return home to work the land. At least in Senegal, the government is setting national goals to help their domestic agriculture become self-sufficient.

Dela and I are in a succession of American volunteers. We've all been coming here two weeks at a time, helping traditionally herding and nomadic people learn diverse growing practices.

We all teach skills and practices they've requested of our organization – the National

Cooperative Business Association's international counterpart called CLUSA.

So you're feeling good about your volunteer trip, that it's worthwhile?

That's a good question. My first return home from Africa nearly 40 years ago, made me realize how small had been my contribution.

Problems of hunger – the very unequal distribution of wealth around the world – hit me hard.

Those problems weren't big numbers hard to feel, hard to understand. Tens of thousands of children starving to death every day. World population doubling every 50 years. One-fourth of the Earth's 7 billion people suffering from hunger and malnourishment.

Teaching school to 250 teens who weren't much younger than me at the time had put faces, laughter, voices, hopes, spirit to the numbers, to the problems.

A very good book that helped me through those times, deepened my understanding and kept me going has been completely updated. It answers a lot of the questions being thrown around by politicians in the primary contest back home in America right now, too. It answers them with clear facts and tremendous understanding.

The book is called "Ten Myths about World Hunger." Francis Moore Lappe (pronounced Lah pay) is still a principal author. It's published by Food First.

Any time I can share food, share the truth – Farmer to Farmer – with good-hearted people in need, it's worthwhile. If it helps them get back control of their lives economically, it's worth it.

■ TO DONATE

Orfordville Lutheran Church is accepting donations to the Forks for Sustainability Fund. Money buys seeds, commercial-grade garden tools and solar food drying materials for nonprofit work with schools and farms in Republic of Congo.

Send donations to the Rev. Andy Twiton, Orfordville Lutheran Church, 210 N. Main St., Orfordville, WI 53576.