



NO HOUSING SLOWDOWN FOR GOAL IN UGANDA

Can you build two houses every day, implement a construction skills training programme, organise the materials required to repair 200 houses, manage nine different local contractors and a team of 31 staff, all at the same time? These are just some of the challenges faced on a daily basis by engineer Steve McEneaney MIEI in his work as part of a Goal rural housing programme in Uganda, writes Mary Faherty.

Steve McEneaney is a Civil Engineer from Monaghan. In Uganda, he is responsible for managing a team of 31 staff, including a core technical team of four Ugandan engineers. According to Steve, knowing that the assistance provided is radically changing the lives of thousands of people in a positive way is a powerful motivating factor for the team. Steve's team are part of the Goal Uganda Housing Support Programme, a rural housing programme initiated by John O'Shea in 2006. The programme targets HIV/AIDS affected families and vulnerable households in the greater Masaka area, just south of the Equator.

Construction started back in April 2007 with six pilot houses; today more than 365 houses have been constructed by the Goal team. The objective of the programme is to provide a wide range of housing related assistance (new houses, repaired houses, household goods, etc) and to develop the capacity of the community to meet their ongoing shelter needs through training initiatives.

Holistic approach

Goal's overall mission is to work towards ensuring that people have access to the fundamental rights of life: shelter, food, water and sanitation, healthcare and education. While the housing support programme is centred on shelter it incorporates elements of water, sanitation and education by providing not just a house but also latrines, rainwater harvesting systems, household goods and training programmes.

Building houses is relatively straightforward; equipping communities to meet their ongoing housing needs is more difficult. Goal cannot stay in Masaka forever, so leaving skills in the community is essential to ensure that the programme has a long-lasting effect. The Goal programme

takes a holistic approach to the housing problem, with an emphasis on training as well as housing construction. This holistic approach has worked well over the first year of the programme and for Goal is one of the key successes of the programme.

Training

Goal's training package includes basic house maintenance, hygiene and malaria control training, as well as fuel-efficient stove construction techniques aimed at housing beneficiaries and their communities. The construction skills training is targeted at disadvantaged youth who have dropped out of formal education.

The content for the construction skills training was developed by Goal in collaboration with a local vocational training institute in Masaka. The course takes place over three months and is divided into 12 sections to cover the basics of domestic construction including; site clearance, setting out, excavations and foundations, brickwork and walling, roofing, finishing and costing as well as repair techniques for existing houses. By targeting youth who have dropped out of formal education, Goal is offering them a second chance, an opportunity for them to develop a skill and ultimately a livelihood. "I'm continually amazed at the sacrifices these young people make just to attend training", says Steve.

"They will walk for over an hour every morning to get to the training site. They're not paid, and don't receive any allowance or food during the training. All five hundred and seventy odd who have completed the course so far have demonstrated great commitment in trying circumstances. We've employed many of them in our direct works programmes and it's immensely rewarding to see some of them developing into budding young contractors."



Tree distributions in Bukulula in the Masaka region.

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Beneficiary selection

Needs assessment and the selection of beneficiaries are the most critical elements of a housing programme and also the most difficult. The requisite time and resources need to be allocated to ensure they are properly addressed, both during planning and implementation. Goal prides itself on assisting the poorest of the poor. If those selected are not the most vulnerable then the entire intervention is wasted. Therefore Goal has developed a detailed seven-step procedure to ensure the selection of beneficiaries is a robust, transparent, equitable process. At least five people are involved in the final selection of every housing beneficiary.

Limited access

The greater Masaka area is the equivalent of Galway, Mayo and Roscommon together or Cork, Kerry and Clare combined. Because the poorest and most vulnerable households are prioritised for housing support the sites are often spread over a large distance and can be quite isolated with limited access. It’s not uncommon to have to transport

the materials to site by wheelbarrow for the last few hundred yards.

In a typical six-week cycle, it can take over a week to visit all 90 operational sites. There are costs associated with taking this approach. However it is felt that supporting vulnerable households on their own land and within their existing network of community and family support, leads to a more sustained improvement in their quality of life.

Goal constructs a mix of standard four-room, three-room, two-room and single-room housing units depending on the specific requirements of each beneficiary household. Nine local contractors are currently employed by Goal to carry out the majority of the new construction. Since the contractors are all based locally, the money spent feeds into the local economy giving it a much-needed boost.

Goal has not contracted out all of the construction work. By retaining an element of the programme for direct implementation works it is possible to carry out repairs on some existing houses. While the majority of houses are dilapidated beyond the point of repair, there are a number of cases where repairs are possible. Typically repair activities include the replacement of roofs, installation of new doors and windows, repairs to existing walls, etc.

A key question that Steve and his team are faced with when designing houses and implementing the programme is - what can be done to make the houses as low maintenance as possible? This is an important factor for vulnerable households who will have little time, energy and capacity to maintain facilities provided.



Steve McEaney and the core technical team of four Ugandan engineers.

Designs are robust and simplified as much as possible, materials need to be durable as well as available locally and the quality of workmanship is monitored closely to ensure that Goal houses will provide shelter and security for decades to come.

In order to offset the impact of a large-scale housing development on the environment, Goal has linked up with a Swedish Agroforestry NGO. To date, Goal has distributed over six thousand tree seedlings in the area, as well as providing training to the recipients on how to care for and manage their trees. A mix of fruit trees and firewood trees are provided, which when cared for properly, can become a source of income. As the trees are purchased locally from farmers involved in the Swedish Agroforestry NGO's programme the money stays in the local economy.

Land tenure

"Land tenure or ownership is critical to any housing programme", says Steve. "The person who owns the land owns the house. So it's essential to establish who owns the lands and what legal rights exist for potential beneficiaries before building can commence."

Within Goal's area of operation in southern Uganda approximately 90% of the people either own their land or have land rights. As a result land tenure is not as contentious an issue as it is in other locations. Like Ireland there is a strong family attachment to the land, and the programme has had no problems with families selling on or renting out their houses.

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Steve will continue working long days in the warm Ugandan sun for at least another year. "For me, working for Goal has given me massive project management experience in a hugely challenging and rewarding environment."

Goal's target is to have constructed or repaired over 1,000 houses by April 2009. It's an ambitious target, but, with construction rates now at two houses per day and over 365 complete to date, it's on target.

How to get involved

If you are willing to support Goal's work overseas – through funding or engineering staff on sabbatical or both – Goal are more than happy to provide you with more information on the opportunities available. For companies, supporting Goal can serve to increase the quality and extent of your contribution to social and economic regeneration. By making Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) an essential part of day-to-day activities you can help to enhance your company's reputation and also provide a motivating factor for staff. ☺