PENHA – the women’s groups say “thank you!”

In November 2013, Vanessa Champion, professional photojournalist and writer, travelled with PENHA (Pastoralist and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa) across Uganda visiting and documenting the Pastoralists that PENHA work with, in particular the women’s groups who have received such phenomenal help and practical support from PENHA. She also saw the difference that generous donations of sewing and knitting machines provided by the Brentwood United Reformed Church and by Trade Aid, the development aid section of the Rotary Club of Grantham Kesteven have made to the women’s income. She saw the huge benefits from the support to the goats project by Open Gate, the Miss K.M. Harbinson’s Charitable Trust and the Eva Reckitt Trust and the support to the office by the Noel Buxton Trust. This has, in turn, boosted their self-esteem and quality of life, enabling them to fulfil their aspirations, building their businesses and ensuring a better future for their families and communities. The women were keen to say “Thank you” to the Rotary Club and Brentwood for their wonderful benevolence and kind thoughtfulness. It has changed their lives.

Warm rich dust kicked up as we drove across country and through the bush. Little children ran alongside our car waving and shouting “muzungu, muzungu!” “white person, white person!” Mothers with children on their hip looked up from washing their pots on the hearth outside their homes, smiled and waved. Beautiful long-horned Ankoli cows meandered slowly beside and across the ridged red mud road, herders with long white sticks walking the verge beside. By my window rushed the lush verdant foliage of coffee bushes, banana trees, the rather elegant cassava plants, all dive-bombed by dragonflies and stunning petrol blue Roller birds.

I’m a professional photojournalist and writer, I travel all over the world covering city life, art and tourism for magazines to the on-the-ground work of NGOs. I first came to PENHA last year after my first trip to Uganda with another NGO. When the opportunity arose to support PENHA through my photography, I jumped to it. We left in October this year, and on my expedition with the team in Uganda, I learnt more about the educational programmes which PENHA runs, the practical provision of giving pregnant cross-breed goats to women to increase revenue, the training in crafts, the marketing guidance, personal and group support as well as lobbying at legislative level to ensure the pastoralists’ views, heritage are listened to and importantly ensuring pastoralists are included in the debate for land rights.

It was clear that there was such high respect for PENHA in Uganda, the women we met were welcoming, hosting us in their traditional round thatched roof huts, Enjuyebyanzi (“House of the MilkPots”). I experienced their traditional milk ceremony, where the large beautiful wooden “cups” which are about a foot tall are first smoked and then the cow’s milk is poured into them. The little woven ‘hats’ which are put on top of the pots to prevent flies from getting into the milk, make them look like lots of little people sitting on the raised area by the “woman of the house”. These pots are given as wedding present, and are the pride of the woman. They are also given big fat round gourds in which they make the ghee from the separated cream from the milk, which they rock on their laps, and takes about 30 minutes to turn. It is in effect churning the cream.

One of the groups is a very organised cooperative run by the rather beautiful Esther, who houses the production facility on her land. Milk comes from all over the area from women in the group. Transport is a huge problem. They use men with bicycles or little scooters. Sometimes the men are unscrupulous and siphon off some of the milk and add water, thus lessening the product. So the next step for this group is a pick-up truck of some kind, thus protecting their produce. Progress.

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PENHA also breed goats at Nkoma Farm which I visited. They give pregnant goats to women, who then nurture them on their own or shared land, and they begin to add to their livestock headcount and in turn can start selling the goats for revenue. Simple. I also visited a goat market, proud strong women in bright dresses, herd their goats and strike hard bargains, holding their own among other traders, buying and selling some rather attractive and healthy goats! They are looking for funding to replicate the Nkoma Farm further up the cattle corridor so more pastoralist women can grow revenue and therefore ensure their children have education, clothing and transport. Any ideas?

Not sure if you know, but I also discovered that there are rising economic and personal challenges for those herders whose traditional way of life and heritage is now threatened by a more sedentary life being urged upon them from the government which is recommending that Pastoralists make a seismic change to their culture and settle into a more agro-pastoralist way of life. While this is of good intentions, it means that there has to be a challenging shift in how they live their lives.

Before the encouragement to settle, traditionally, the men would drive the cattle across the bush, while the women stayed in the huts, taking care of the children, feeding them and looking after their goats which help provide revenue. When the land was challenging as a result of the dry season or maybe tribal threats, they would move. But now, as they are restricted to one piece of land, and are building more “brick” structures, the Pastoralists need to explore different means of supporting their families, and are developing additional economic streams for revenue.

With this in mind, you have no idea how beneficial the sewing and knitting machines have been, and the women are so extremely grateful. They wanted me to say a big thank you to you. With the change of traditional ways of life and a forced need to supplement their income, the women with the use of the sewing and knitting machines, can now make uniforms for the local schools thus earning money. They also make clothes for women who bring in their own material. These women at the moment do not have enough resources and capital to buy a stock of material to make some sample dresses to have on display, nor can they afford to have a supply of reserve material which they could sell to their customers in addition to the designs and dress-making service. The industrious concentration of these women was wonderful to see. They work in the half light, the African sun pouring in through the open doors and windows, the chit chat and laughter of the women resonating right up to the corrugated roof of their homes and “shops” they rent.

So thank you once again, from the bottom of these women’s hearts and from PENHA. Your gift has brought change and a better future for so many women. The money they earn is pooled together and held by the lead woman. Like a true cooperative, these women are driven to help themselves, by giving them the tools to ‘fish’ you have ensured they can feed their families for years to come.

Thank you, it’s amazing what a gift can do.