

Thea Trust

Project work in Africa

1. About Thea

Thea was established as a charitable trust on Christmas Eve 1998. The Trust has two major objectives:

- to advance religion by facilitating communication and contact between Christians of different national, regional, political, denominational, racial or ethnic groups with a view to deepening communion in worship;
- to mediate for the public benefit and for the greater glory of God between Christian members of national, regional, political, denominational, racial or ethnic groups which are in conflict and so empower them to reconcile their differences, both for themselves personally, and (where possible) for and on behalf of the groups of which they are representatives.

Thea has supported Kigali-based Partnership Christian Mission for Central Africa (PCMCA) for a number of years, contributing to a range of projects in Rwanda. PCMCA has Rwandan origins and it is led by Rwandan pastors. The organisation exists to further Christian communion, in line with Thea's objectives as detailed above.

2. Project work in Rwanda

Since its inception, Thea has contributed to a number of projects in Rwanda through PCMCA. These have all aimed at developing lasting links within and between Christian communities, using both spiritual and economic tools.

Our projects have focused on micro-businesses and pastor training, both of which contribute significantly to overcoming the legacy of the Rwandan genocide. As detailed below, pastors and faith communities often play a significant leadership role in Rwandan society. Micro-loans for small business projects contribute to the alleviation of the problems of a number of the victims of the 1994 genocide, in particular the bereaved, orphans, and those infected by HIV/AIDS.

We believe Thea's experience in this area is particularly instructive and points to a number of trends in Rwandan affairs upon which future policy and outreach programmes can be built.

2.1. Micro-loans

Background to loans

Individuals sought loans for a number of reasons:

- To fight against poverty;

- To meet the needs of their families;
- To become self-reliant;
- To avoid having to resort to crime.

The contribution of small businesses to vulnerable groups across Rwandan society should not be under-estimated, especially in the light of the high prevalence of HIV/AIDS, and the considerable number of HIV/AIDS orphans in both Rwandan and wider African society.

In our experience, it is clear that one of the major priorities for all beneficiaries of our loan programme was education. Using the money gained from their businesses for education was seen as most urgent, in particular as a way to enable the next generation to escape poverty. However, concerns about school fees often detract from long term business decisions.

The Commission for Africa has rightly acknowledged that education is a priority for Africa. We agree with the report's conclusion that strong and sustained progress in human development requires fundamental change. As the report states, a priority should be "providing the funding for all boys and girls in sub-Saharan Africa to receive free **basic education** that equips them with skills for contemporary Africa. Secondary, higher, vocational education, adult learning, and teacher training should receive appropriate emphasis within the overall education system." This would contribute significantly to increased economic growth on the continent, and would increase the effectiveness of the micro-businesses we have described.

However, obstacles do exist, even when one is seeking to promote simple initiatives. One significant hurdle which should be addressed is the nature of the popular banking system in Rwanda. As in any developing country, the banking system is under-developed and is bedevilled by bureaucracy and inaccessibility. In addition, the cost of public transport to popular banks in urban centres often acts as a disincentive to their use. Those that can make the journey then face long delays and exorbitant bank charges, which add further to the problems already caused by inflation and/or devaluation. In addition, the vast majority of popular banks in Rwanda are not geared to deal with the small sizes of loans that micro-businesses will be dealing with.

As an organisation with only limited resources, Thea has only been able to provide small loans in the short term. Whilst these have helped to lift living standards temporarily, they will not prove sufficient to sustain higher living standards in the long-term. Larger-scale projects, which will need additional funding streams, will be required for this. From our earlier experience, we firmly believe that such future projects could reap significant additional benefits.

2.2 Pastor training

Faith communities and by extension, the Church, play an extremely strong role in Rwandan society which is often not recognised in Western society encompassing spiritual, social and economic needs:

- pastors and deacons have considerable responsibilities;
- In our experience, the work of meeting people's needs in Rwandan communities often falls to pastors and deacons;
- Pressures are great because of the considerable needs of congregations facing abject poverty, the continuing aftermath of the 1994 genocide and the increasing prevalence of HIV/AIDS across all sections of society.

There are, therefore, immense opportunities to work with churches and other faith groups on poverty alleviation and reconciliation. However, the poverty of Rwanda means that the majority of religious organisations lack the external funding required for them to make a meaningful contribution to society. Funding is required both for basic provisions and training. The major sources of such funding are often to be found abroad, particularly in the West. Faith groups and faith-based charities are a substantial source of such funding.

Our research indicates that the vast majority of pastors (approximately 90%) are not trained. This has a number of wider implications for their work: it means they lack confidence and suffer from low self-esteem, exacerbated by the low pay they receive for their important work. Furthermore, they lack any defined leadership skills, making it even harder for them to meet the needs of the communities that rely on them so much.

Very little independent evangelical theological training is currently available in Rwanda, meaning that either pastors need to seek training in other parts of Africa (in the main, South Africa) or new facilities need to be put in place. Some training is undertaken through external churches, but Rwandan communities lack any real ownership over this. The concept of "ownership" should be considered very important, giving pastors firm roots in communities. Thea has supported training provided through the auspices of PCMCA, but greater resources are needed if such work is to continue in an effective manner. Given the integral role of the Church in Rwandan society, it should also be noted that society would benefit from training at all levels, including youth ministries, women ministries and Sunday schools.

3. Other community organisations

In the course of our work in Rwanda, we have also encountered a number of other organisations, the work and experience of which may be instructive:

- **Community of Jerusalem Pentecostal Church:** Actively ministers with vulnerable people who make up the majority of the congregation. The Church helps vulnerable children, particularly orphans and those drawn from one-parent families, to enter the education system. There is considerable eagerness within the congregation to set up business associations and vocational training, but the Church's ability to do so is hampered by the limited resources it has at its disposal. The leaders of the Church are highly motivated to see change in their communities, including poverty alleviation, empowerment, education, training, reconciliation and Christian discipleship.

- **Interfaith AIDS network:** A multi-faith network with over 450 HIV Positive members, focusing on evangelicism and outreach to the community. Certified by the government. Also interested in the potential of small businesses to give people the power to help themselves.
- **L'Association des Femmes Chef de Familles:** Again, works on a number of micro business initiatives, and is involved in HIV awareness.

4. Conclusion

Thea has only been able to scratch the surface of Rwandan society with its work to date. Our experience suggests that extensions of both our micro-business and pastor-training projects would reap wider benefits, both within faith communities and by extension, within Rwandan society.

This paper only provides a short summary of some of the work Thea has already undertaken in Africa, the results of this work and the direction this points us in. Further information, including detailed case studies of individual beneficiaries, can be found in a major report produced for Thea Trust earlier this year. We are happy to provide copies of this report.