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Sowing seeds of success

A Malaysian couple who came to Uganda for mission work 23 years ago have found much happiness and success in business ventures..

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PASTORS Sekaran Vellasamy and V. Mary, who are husband and wife, were fresh out of Bible school and in their 20s when they were asked to go on missionary work to Uganda in 1986.

It was a huge commitment for both as they had to leave their families behind and relocate to a country that was being ravaged by many years of civil war after the ouster of military dictator Idi Amin.

Life was tough and dangerous for the young couple in the beginning. It was common for armed bandits to roam the streets, where gunfire was incessant.

"But we knew that it was our calling and we really wanted to help the people, especially the children there.

"We were shocked when we first arrived here from London. There was nothing. Everything had been destroyed," the 49-year old Malacca-born Sekaran recalled.

Working with orphaned children

He and his wife, then based in the capital, Kampala, were tasked with coordinating relief work to rural areas and briefing aid teams. They continued doing this for six years before deciding to move to Rakai, some 200km south of the country from Kampala, to set up an orphanage for children who had lost their parents to AIDS.

(In the early 1990s, 13% of Ugandan residents had HIV. Recent statistics from the World Health Organisation show that AIDS has left a long-lasting impact on Uganda's population with two million children orphaned since the epidemic began.)

They took care of more than 500 children at the orphanage and also helped people to bore tube wells for clean water, provided medicines and also vaccinated some 10,000 children against various diseases.

Fortunately, funding was never a problem.

The couple's efforts were supported by Canadian NGOs such as World Vision International and the Canadian International Development Authority.

But while their own two children were growing up, they realised that they needed to find ways to be self-sufficient and not just depend on handouts and donations.

"So, we handed over the orphanage to a Canadian NGO and with our savings of about US\$10,000 (RM36,000), we ventured into the business of distributing chickens in Uganda in

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1997," he said.

The company, Ugachick, was an instant hit and has since grown into a huge business. It currently distributes more than a million chickens to about 200 hotels, supermarkets and stores around Kampala each year.

"I was motivated to ensure my business flourished because I did not want to rely on funds from outsiders anymore," said Sekaran.

Doing business was not too difficult for him as he had grown up watching his father, a former bread vendor, run a chain of South Indian restaurants in Malacca.

Sekaran, the eldest of 11 siblings, said he spotted another opportunity before the Global Smart International Dialogue, which was held in Uganda in 2001.

Realising the demand for quality furniture in the country, he embarked on his second venture – the Malaysian Furnishing Centre.

The store selling Malaysian furniture was launched by former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the dialogue.

It too has since grown into a big business. The company has eight suppliers from Johor, Kuala Lumpur and Penang and the annual sales amount to about US\$2.5mil (RM8.8mil).

"I saw the potential and just went in. Profits from business enables us to help the needy here," said Sekaran.

Although it is difficult to juggle between social work and business, he and his wife are still very much involved in helping to build more schools for the poor and orphanages and even assisting people to venture into farming.

They are also toying with the idea of offering Malaysian cuisine in Uganda.

"I come from a family involved in the food business and I hope to also try going into this industry," he said.

Sekaran feels that Uganda and many other African countries hold immense potential, especially in the information technology, telecommunication and construction sectors.

"The problem is most people, including Malaysians, are worried about venturing here as they have this misconception that all of Africa is poor, filled with hungry people, and sickened by AIDS," he said.

Sekaran attributed their success to hard work, honesty and integrity, adding that they had never taken a loan or bought anything on hire purchase.

Sekaran shared his success story and spoke about investment opportunities in Uganda with Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin during a dinner organised on the sidelines of the 19th Global Smart Partnership Dialogue 2009 held in Monyonyo in Uganda recently.

Muhyiddin led a group of Malaysians, including politicians, government servants

and the media, to the three-day dialogue that was initiated 14 years ago by Dr Mahathir.

Investment opportunities

Uganda Investment Authority (UID) executive director Prof Maggie Kigozi explained that the agency's role was similar to that of the Malaysian Investment Development Authority (MIDA).

She said there were many investment opportunities in the country but Malaysian participation was still relatively low.

"Malaysians are only involved in running businesses like hotel, furniture and oil palm," she said, adding that the country's top investors were from the United Kingdom, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and India.

Uganda, she said, had developed rapidly over the past five years and had Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) totalling \$736mil (RM2.6bil) last year.

"We need value-added investments in agriculture, mining, oil, tourism, fruit processing, ICT, film industry, healthcare, power generation, textile and construction.

"We have ample resources and a good English-speaking workforce which can complement these industries," she said, adding that Malaysians had in the past showed interest but the projects somehow failed to kick off.

"Hopefully, success stories like that of Sekaran and his wife will help bring more Malaysian investors here," she said.



Fine example: Sekaran got a chance to speak about his success when he met Muhyiddin during a dinner on the sidelines of the 19th Global Smart Partnership Dialogue in Uganda.
– Bernama