

## **Trustee Trip to Tanzania**

*In September 2009 READ International's trustees travelled to Tanzania at their own expense to accompany a one week trustee/patron tour, to see first hand the work READ is doing out there. This is their account of the week. Each trustee blogs on a different day.*

*Monday 31<sup>st</sup> August, 2009 (Travel from Dar es Salaam to Tabora - 600km)*

*By Tom Levitt MP, Patron*

*Flying towards the heart of Tanzania from Dar es Salaam we looked down on desolate hillsides and sparsely populated scrubland. Our travels over the next five days would take us many miles on road and on dirt tracks, visiting schools which were receiving help from READ International volunteers throughout August and September. We were almost literally following in the steps of David Livingstone, the explorer.*

*First stop was a visit to the Boys' and Girls' schools in Tabora, which were home in their time to several Tanzanian Cabinet ministers - and it shows. There is a confidence to them which was less evident elsewhere. They were business-like, organised in a way that Europeans would recognise. 'Well established' is the clue.*

*At the Girls' School we were greeted in a hangar-like assembly hall with a school song that was delicate if interminable. The girls were thrilled to be receiving not just our books but also the most massive television I have ever seen, courtesy of the local MP, Mama Sitta. Clearly electricity, influence and aspiration are not in short supply here.*

*Tabora is a bustling town, busy, important, a major economic centre today and a confluence of the slave trade in the past. It was an ideal place to start our travels, allowing us to appreciate stark contrasts. Tabora's schools were certainly at one end of the spectrum.*

*Nine out of ten of Tanzania's 2,000 secondary schools are less than five years old.*

Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> September, 2009 (Travel from Tabora to Urambo - 100km)

By Graham Alcott, Chairman

Breakfast began at Tom's resthouse. The rest of us were staying at a guesthouse close by, but Mama Sitta was insistent that as Tom was a British MP, and therefore a VIP, he should stay in his own private resthouse, complete with 24hr security guard. Us 'proles' down the road had running hot water and hot showers though, so we kinda felt we had the better deal!

After a breakfast full of speeches and a spectacular spread of food compared to what we'd seen for previous breakfasts, we headed first to visit Mama Sitta's mother-in-law, the mother of one of the most senior politicians in Tanzania, Samuel Sitta.

From there we then headed to Urambo School. Urambo was a small but very tidy compound. We were warmly welcomed by a group of dancers, and as we left, were presented with buckets of honey. A large bucket each. In fact, more honey than I had ever seen in my life. We felt humbled by this gesture, and it was great to be able to share in the fact that the Urambo and Tabora districts are amongst the top honey-producing areas in the world.

At Kiloleni Secondary School - our last school with Mama Sitta in tow - the volunteers held their traditional 'assembly' talk about the value of the books the school was receiving. As usual, the students greeted the arrival of the books with great enthusiasm, and also jumped for joy on seeing an array of replica Premiership football shirt, with cries of 'Torres!', 'Drogba!' and 'Rooney!' I did my usual long attempt to explain how it was Aston Villa who invented the football league, how there were lots of United's and only one Villa, how we were the rising stars of the Premiership and so on. As usual in Africa, it ended politely without a single convert to the Villa cause.

In the afternoon, after the long drive to Tabora, there was time for a visit to the house once occupied by Livingstone, and the site where he once liberated African slaves. Personally, I was shattered after the long drive, so took some time for an afternoon nap in the beautiful and colonial surroundings of the Tabora Railway Hotel, one of the finest hotels in Tanzania. Sipping tea on my little terrace, and looking over the quaint gardens, complete with tortoises under the

trees, I felt strangely disorientated: the fleeting moments of luxury in Africa serve only as a reminder of the basic lifestyle outside the walls.

In the evening we had a wonderful dinner in the hotel where the volunteers had made their home for the previous six weeks. We could tell that for them it was a great time of reflection on the journey they had been on, and the work they had so diligently and ably completed. It was great to share in the joy of that experience, and help them bask in their 'glow'.

Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> September, 2009 (Travel from Urambo to Shinyanga - 250km)

By Martín Farrell, Trustee

Half way through our week it was another early start and we were on our way to Shinyanga from Tabora. Our vehicle was tough enough but not as tough as the truck that was heading straight for us and forced us off the track. Oh well we thought, as we've stopped anyway, may as well pay a short call in the bushes.

A momentary respite and a moment of quiet reflection on my place in the vast silent, dry landscape. And the thought that the whole day, and indeed the whole week, was on and off the track the whole time. But all the books collected and sorted and fundraised for during the year, got delivered.

On and off track the whole week. On the first day the flight to Tabora was two, then four hours delayed. But we got there. We were told that the flight from Shinyanga which was cancelled had actually never existed in the first place. But we made it back to Dar es Salaam anyway.

The vehicles which the local administration office had agreed to provide to take us and the books to three schools in the region weren't there, so we wait, musing on the meaning of things and Tanzania time. Then they appear and we're back on track.

The shelves for the refurbishment of the library at Jivani School were all painted and waiting, Tanzania style, for the electricity to come back on. No power to make the holes for the screws = no shelves = no place to put the books = no library = nowhere for the students to find the books = no education and a poorer future. But it all gets done. One day.

The main road in Kahama is alive with bicycles and people and mattresses and buckets and stuff piled high on heads and saddles. Vibrant, chaotic, friendly, poor and somehow all working and getting along.

Amidst the shacks and modest buildings left and right, with the ubiquitous corrugated iron roofs, and with the African dusk falling, we blink and see a pink palace. It was indeed pink and we soon found out that this palace in the dust was to be our hotel for the night, courtesy of the Honourable Maïge MP, an enticing contrast to the more modest accommodation we enjoyed the rest of the week.

**Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2009 (Travel from Shinyanga to Kahama, then on to Mwanza - 300km)**

**By Rachel Stevenson, Treasurer**

Another early start, after a quick breakfast we head to the local authority buildings in Kahama where the books have been stored overnight. While some of the group loads the jeeps, I take the opportunity to talk with the volunteers who have been based in the Shinyanga region for the last six weeks. I learn more about their time volunteering for READ International and am thoroughly impressed by their hard-work, determination and commitment.

We set off for the first school of the day, an hour away on some of the roughest dirt tracks that we have experienced so far. Ngaya Secondary School is set in a beautiful location, surrounded by flat plains of bush punctuated by large, jagged rock formations. This school, like the majority in this region of Tanzania, is less than 5 years old and as a result has less than 200 pupils. We discover that there are only two qualified teachers, whose efforts are supplemented by untrained volunteers from the local community. It is our hope that the pupils will be able to use the books we provide for self-study to supplement their education as well as 'formally' in the classroom.

There are some great moments at this school. The sports equipment we provide includes some Frisbees and I have a fun quarter of an hour teaching some students how to play. A group of parents arrive and the mothers treat us to traditional songs and dance. Not to be outdone, their daughters then follow with a performance of their own. We give the mothers a lift back to Ngaya

village after the book distribution and have a brilliant, if not slightly surreal, experience as they spontaneously sing throughout the short journey praising our host, the Hon. Maige, for bringing us to the school.

The distribution at Ngaya goes well, with the pupils getting involved in unpacking and stamping the books, while our volunteers spend time with the teachers. This exercise is vitally important as it allows us to demonstrate to the teachers how to find relevant information in the books and to link it to the syllabus. It also allows the students to look at the books and the stamping process gives them a sense of ownership.

After a couple of hours we leave for the second school, Bulige Secondary School. This school is in almost complete contrast to Ngaya. It is larger and better established, with several buildings. It has solar panels on the roof to provide electricity. However, the biggest difference is the overall attitude of all members of the school community. The head teacher is a very impressive character. He has instilled true discipline and a sense of pride in his students. The students all speak English very well (and presumably write it well too, crucial for when they sit their exams). The Head Boy gives a speech to welcome us; he is a real character who cheekily berates the local civil servants present for not doing more to help his school.

The students throw themselves in to unpacking and stamping the books. As at the other schools we have visited, they love to have their photograph taken and they soon relax and become keen to chat with us.

We leave Bulige to return briefly to Kahama where we leave the volunteers who are returning to Shinyanga to complete their work in the region. A quick stop to refuel on chipsi mayai (literally a chip omelette!) and we set off again. A problem with the airline means we cannot fly back to Dar es Salaam from Shinyanga as originally planned. We now face a four hour drive to Mwanza where we will fly from in the morning. This is an unexpected bonus - Mwanza is on Lake Victoria so we're hoping for a very quick sightseeing tour in the morning before continuing with our trip.

Friday 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2009 (Travel from Mwanza back to Dar - 800km)

By Graham Allcott, Chairman

The morning after the long night before. After the long drive into Mwanza we awoke slightly nervous. After all, our previous experiences with the humourously named Precision Air hadn't filled us with confidence, and we had to get back to Dar for the big celebration evening that night.

Maige was pretty punctual in greeting us, and insisted that although we only had an hour and a half before the flight, we should take a walk down on the banks of Lake Victoria. What else would you expect from the deputy minister for tourism, keen to show us one of the most beautiful views in Tanzania. Having sat many times on the banks of Lake Victoria in Uganda, it was fantastic to feel that somehow my involvement with East Africa had come full circle - here I was gazing back from the other side!

At the airport, there was the usual shuffling around, and the challenge of transporting the Tabora honey we'd be given in some pretty flimsy plastic drinking water bottles. Of course, with a Tanzanian minister in tow it was worth a shout trying to get them to allow us to put it into hand luggage, but when that failed, I had the glamorous job of fitting it into my backpack, which involved emptying all my dirty laundry all over the chairs of the VIP lounge. Somehow I don't think I'm quite ready for the VIP lifestyle..!

The flight back was relatively smooth (Dar airport has a luxurious - tarmac! - runway). The traffic back in the taxi from the airport though, was anything but. Friday rush hour, Dar Es Salaam style! After that, we had a few minutes back at the YMCA hostel before heading out to meet with KPMG to discuss our registration of a Tanzanian Non-Governmental-Organisation (NGO), which they are kindly providing us with pro bono help. It's hard enough trying to negotiate set up companies and charities in the UK, let alone trying to do it in a country with a different main language, a culture of paper bureaucracy, and a reputation for the occasional use of bribery amongst civil servants. Thankfully, KPMG have made the process very smooth for us, and in Rachel, we have an excellent treasurer who asks all the questions I wish I'd thought of!

After that, and a quick stop at the shoe-shining man, we were ready for the evening celebration. We were joined by our two ministerial colleagues, some

great new contacts from the world of business and charity in Dar Es Salaam, many of whom expressed great enthusiasm to form new partnerships, and of course hosted brilliantly and generously by Diane, the British High Commissioner for Tanzania. It's great knowing that we have Laela based in Dar Es Salaam on a full time basis now, so that we're able to keep in touch with many of these new partners, and develop the conversations further once Rob and the team are back in the UK.

Finally, Friday night allowed us some quality conversation time and indeed some quality 'drinking time' with a number of the READ volunteers. We felt pretty tired but exhilarated after our brief visit, but it was easy to see that for many of the volunteers, Tanzania already felt like a home from home after just a few short weeks there. But of course those few weeks come after a year in which education in Tanzania plays a major part in their lives as throughout their year as volunteers collecting books, raising funds and spreading the word. The impact of half a million extra text books, and thousands of kids inspired to excel in education by seeing their efforts can't be measured in statistics alone, but certainly we all felt a great sense of satisfaction at a job well done. It's that volunteer effort and drive that really fuels READ International.