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Vermonters Gives Kenyan Women Opportunities

By PATRICK McARDLE STAFF WRITER



DORSET – The story of Kathleen Colson and the BOMA Fund challenges many preconceived notions of helping to fight poverty in Africa because Colson thinks of the people of Kenya less like victims and more like Vermonters.

Like many Vermonters, people in northern Kenya are living in a place where there's not enough economic opportunity and like people in her home state, the villagers of Kenya don't want a handout, they just want the means to earn a living and decide their own futures, Colson believes.

"I sometimes say that Africa is drowning in our good intentions," Colson said.

Years of building

Colson, 53, of Dorset, is the founder and executive director of the BOMA Fund, a nonprofit that helps Africans, primarily women, form small, self-sustaining businesses through the Rural Entrepreneur Access Project or REAP.

There are two part-time employees in Vermont and the operations director, Ahmed Omar, a few part-time employees and about a dozen volunteer business mentors in Kenya.

While Colson said she had a long history of raising funds for causes in Africa like building

orphanages and preserving wildlife, it was the request of a friend, Joseph Lekuton, who is from northern Kenya, which got her to look at helping people in the poorest and most remote areas of that region. After seeing the approaches taken by others, Colson said she came to believe the only way to truly overcome African poverty was to engage and empower African people.

"I find that aid organizations tend to show the negative imagery of Africa as a way to fundraise and I find that pretty insulting to the Africa that I know. I also find that unlike other poor parts of the world, there is this sense that people have to 'save' Africa and I don't see that. I don't think that Africa needs to be saved. I think they need opportunities. There's so many people that I run into that say, 'I have a great idea about how to help Africa,' and my first question to them is, 'Have you asked the Africans?'" she said.

For two years, Colson traveled through the region of northern Kenya meeting with village elders and other community leaders because she knew that many of the villagers were suspicious of strangers who tried to impose aid.

"When I started out, I knew we wanted to focus on income as a development strategy. We wanted to focus on people's ability to earn their own income and a lot of that came from a conversation I had with an elder when I was spending the first two years, doing a lot of research and trying lots of different programs. That elder said to me, 'You know, 10 years ago, everyone told us that we had to educate our children and so we did that. We sold a lot of our very valuable livestock to pay for many of the children ... to go to school. We made all those sacrifices and they've got these great educations. Now they're back in the village and what do we do with them? We have no jobs.' And that, to me, was the defining moment, that conversation, and from that, came the idea, 'OK, we have to focus on jobs,'" Colson said.

Investment, not loans

Colson said she met with micro loan organizations but even those seeking to lend to poor and rural people found the people in northern Kenya too poor and Colson abandoned the idea of starting her own micro lending as too expensive and resource-consuming.

"We decided that instead of putting all that money into running a micro lending organization, we would do something that most people don't do in Africa: We would just hand the poor people money and we would take the money that would go into what would be the micro lending organization and instead, we would invest it in training. So with our program, we go into a village, we train two local people that are in the village region as business mentors and those people then deliver business skills training programs to the people that are running businesses. They then also mentor them for two years. Instead of giving people a loan, we give them a grant to help them start their business and that's their working capital," she said.

The businesses are all run by groups of five people, which Colson said protected individual owners from being asked for credit or loans because the money belongs to the group and not an individual owner, and to date, 225 businesses have been started. None of the businesses have failed yet, although Colson said she expects that some probably will, and the average business supports not just its owners but about 25 dependent children.

Good examples

One of the most successful businesses started by BOMA provides a good example of what can happen when people are given the opportunity to develop and adjust their business to the needs of their community.

A group of five women were running a business out of a small kiosk that sold tea and sugar but soon realized they had competitors close by selling similar products. They realized that by merging their resources with another entity, also a BOMA Fund business, they would have enough capital to retool and fill an untapped market niche. In this case, they found success slaughtering a camel and selling the meat and Colson said the business owners now have more than \$1,000 in savings and four camels on reserve.

"We find the businesses are starting out at this very simple level and (the people are) learning their skills and then they start to diversify and add other things. We've also found that (when we) give them seed capital, that allows them to buy wholesale which means they can take the stuff that they want to sell at their little shop back to their village and for the first time ever, they have affordable food in the village," Colson said.

Colson, who is from Medina, N.Y., near Buffalo, has a long history with Africa. She went to the University of Nairobi for a semester in 1978 while a student at St. Lawrence University in New York. It was the first time she had ever been on a plane and the trip became a turning point in her life.

Since 1986, she has run a safari business on a regular, but not uninterrupted basis, and she still runs the business from Dorset where she has lived for about 10 years.

Taking time

BOMA, which means "to fortify" in Swahili, takes up most of Colson's working time now. She travels to Kenya at least twice a year and stays for at least a month each time. When she's in Vermont, she's on the phone, usually by 5:30 a.m. because of the time difference in Africa, and much of her time in the United States is spent traveling to meet and court donors.

"It's hard for BOMA to compete with a lot of much more tangible causes. I find that donors like very tangible things like wells and schools and health clinics and orphanages and we're a lot more intangible, so I have to spend a lot of time with people or try to get introductions to people that in some way understand the challenges of Africa," she said.

Colson would like people in the United States to reconsider the way they look at Africa and poverty.

"Everybody thinks that to help Africa, we have to give things away. They don't do that in China. They don't do that in India where there's equally as many poor people. It's like somebody coming into Vermont and saying, 'Gee, I don't think that people in Vermont are drinking enough milk so let's give it all away.' What do you think that does to the Vermont dairy farmer? Well, there are farmers in Africa and we use U.S. taxpayer money to buy grain from U.S. farmers and we ship it on international carriers. By the time it gets to Africa, the budget for that food relief, 70 percent of it has been returned to American or

international people in business and the shipping industry. Then that food is dumped on the open market. It's pretty hard to compete with free," she said.

Colson said a lot of items that are donated to Africa just make it harder for Africans to develop an "entrepreneurial spirit" and earn a living because there is no market for goods that are being given away.

"We need to be thinking about the consequences of our actions and that's why we focus on building businesses for Africans and they can earn their own incomes. From that, they can solve problems that they're dealing with. They don't have enough money for health care. They don't have enough money to send their children to school. ... And that's where, I think, we're different. We want to put that decision of what your future is going to look like into the hands of people," she said.

There are also organizations that claim to be dedicated to helping Africans but become, as bureaucracies often do, dedicated to self-perpetuation.

"The whole idea of poverty alleviation is to make your organization obsolete. We have poverty all over the world but poverty in Africa is very big business. It employs a lot of people and some of the stats are very troubling. The countries that have received the most aid are the ones that are the poorest. Africa is poorer now than it was 30 years ago and yet, people have put billions of dollars into the continent. People rest that results on the shoulders of the Africans and I think they're pointing the finger in the wrong direction," Colson said.

While the solution Colson tries to offer is less expensive – a business can usually be up and running at a cost of about \$250 – she knows it is not simple or easy.

Funding struggles

Funding may be less than what other organizations need but it's not insignificant. The businesses have to be guided by mentors, volunteers who for BOMA may have to walk 10 to 12 miles to a client and risk attack by lions, hyenas or snakes, and monitored for years. Many business obstacles like land rights or access to utilities have political solutions but "politics is a very dangerous business in Kenya," Colson said, so the group strongly avoids any kind of advocacy.

Northern Kenya is also the site of ethnic battles over issues like grazing rights and water that kill more than a 1,000 people a year.

Colson herself doesn't travel alone in Africa.

"I have a guy that has an AK-47 and he's right at my shoulder, everywhere I go and I sleep in the village and he sleeps right outside the door of my hut most of the time. Part of that is we don't run into any of these livestock raiders so it's self-protection. We also want people to know that I am protected, guarded. There's a network of scouts that let us know We're not talking about 300 guys with spears, we're talking about 300 Gabbras that come across the Ethiopian border and they all carry AK-47s to raid a village. We don't want to run into those guys," she said.

There are also the lesser risks: Surviving days where the average temperature is 110 to 120 degrees and being fed by African villagers.

"I'm not a big fan of goat and I've eaten a lot of it to build relationships with people but usually, they give me raw goat intestines. I eat it and then I run around and throw up. If we're in a village where we've been working for a while, I've now become a vegetarian," she said.

There are also, of course, rewards. Colson said Omar had recently gotten a quote she needed for one of the organizations that funds BOMA from a woman that runs one of the businesses.

"Before BOMA came to help us, my family will just eat one meal which will be lunch but now we have dinner from time to time. This business has become my security. I can get money to pay for hospitals insurance. I can pay for my children's school. I am self-employed. I have dignity and I have respect," the Kenyan woman said.

While the effort can be exhausting, Colson said she feels she has no choice but to keep BOMA working until it grows to self-sufficiency.

"The way that we, in the long run, become sustainable, is to raise enough funds to run our organization like a business. We need good professional people who can accurately provide the financial transparency and accountability that donors expect. I think we will do that when we have our stats and we can really prove to the world that we are making a difference, we have measurable results and we can show you people who have gone from one meal to two. I hope the money follows all that work. I hope that we find people who truly care about Africa and truly care about making a difference," she said.

For more information about the BOMA Fund or to make a contribution, call 231-2542 or on visit the website at www.BOMAFund.org.

patrick.mcardle@rutlandherald.com
