My journey to ground zero in the fight against poverty

Ryan Benn

It's a mild summer evening in Kenya, a place known for its parading wildebeest and sprawling savannahs. I'm tired and a little twitchy from a 26-hour flight—but mostly just excited for the next few days of exploring and learning. My wingman on this journey is Alive Publishing Group's Chairman, Volker Wagner, who's also my boss, partner, and friend. Not to mention, he is the driving force behind our organization's long-time involvement in Africa and is a force for good.

Tomorrow, we'll head to the Maasai Mara National Reserve for a quick safari (when in Kenya ...). After that? We'll travel to Kitale, an agricultural town where a nonprofit organization called Organics 4 Orphans (O4O) is growing change, one organic kale seedling at a time.
On our first full day in Kenya, my soul is warm. I feel energized, stepping back on African soil for the first time in several years. This place is special. You can feel the energy of the land and the people with every breath and step. At the same time, you might experience a sense of disorganization and anxiety and (if you’re like me) an acute awareness of your status as a privileged visitor. This all culminates in tangled feelings of excitement, guilt, and curiosity.

After witnessing the great wildebeest migration across the Mara River, where only one unwitting wildebeest was snatched by an awaiting croc, we’re back to the red-tinged soil of a Maasai Mara runway. A four-seat (pilot included) Cessna has been arranged for our flight to Kitale, where O4O does the bulk of its work.

I suppose this is where I should reinforce the term TIA (this is Africa), quoted most notably by Leonardo DiCaprio’s character in Blood Diamond. In this case, TIA refers to the fact that our charter flight is with an unknown airline, to which we randomly sent money and asked to be picked up at the most random of dirt airstrips in Kenya. ♥
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Throughout my trip, I shared many deep conversations with Dale. When asked about his most memorable experiences, he says, “One is the love that the African people have shown us. Second would be the testimonies of people who are now healthy and do not fear dying from sickness—they feel that their lives have a sense of security and can plan for the future.”

"You can worry, or you can go with the flow—because TIA. And things do tend to work in Africa, albeit a bit differently. Our plane ends up arriving ahead of schedule, and the one-hour flight is beautiful. Our host for the next couple of days, Dale Bolton of Natural Calm Canada, is there to greet us. Dale and his wife, Linda, founded O4O, and he currently acts as its International Executive Director. He’s accompanied by O4O’s Kenyan Country Director, Boaz Oduor."

What is O4O?

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The 4 pillars of O4O

1. Food Security
2. Nutritional Education
3. Disease Prevention
4. Income Generation
Dale and Boaz whisk us to our first stop on what will be a whirlwind tour: The Growing Health Institute, a training centre opened in 2011 by O4O. Here, I’m told, students of all backgrounds—including leaders from 20 different countries—learn about nutrition, organic agriculture, and medicinal plants like moringa.

Instead of the periodic table I remember from my school days, a colourful chart on one wall lists the nutrient density of various foods. The rankings, developed by Joel Fuhrman, MD, are based on how many micronutrients each food contains per calorie. Kale, collard greens, and turnip greens rank the highest with a score of 1,000. White rice scores a measly 12, while cola rounds out the list with a score of 1.

Nutritionally lacklustre corn (it scores a 44 on that nutrient density chart) is the key crop for Kenyans, making up 65 percent of their diet. Endless maize fields mark most of Kenya’s farmable landscape. But at O4O’s training centre, glossy greens reign supreme. Teachers emphasize the importance of growing and consuming foods high in vitamin A and iron: two nutrients that are often found wanting in the typical African diet.

Malnutrition is a deadly serious issue in Kenya. Almost half of the country’s population lives below the poverty line, including many kids. Yet O4O’s training centre manages to approach the problem with optimism and enthusiasm. One man there wears a shirt that reminds me of something you might see on alive’s Instagram feed—in big block letters, it reads, “KALE IS THE NEW BEEF.”

Did you know?

Kenya is the world’s largest exporter of tea (really!). Recently, tea farmers in Kenya even developed a new type of tea with unique properties: purple tea. It’s packed with antioxidants, and brands like JusTea have started working with small-scale farmers to provide organic, fair trade blends.

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341 health-growing projects created in five countries
2,000+ prison garden beds developed, providing essential nutritious food
17,276 adults and children benefitted by O4O initiatives
20+ water recovery projects completed, helping to reduce water-borne diseases

Yes, you can be a part of O4O’s story, too—without even leaving your couch. Visit organics4orphans.org to read more about O4O’s initiatives. It’s so easy to help out. A single donation can help O4O educate more farmers, supply them with seeds and tools, and provide clean water for communities in need. And, hey, wouldn’t that be a great Christmas present?

It’s more nutritious
Research shows that organic produce may contain more nutrients than their conventional counterparts. Plus, they’re grown without potentially toxic chemicals. O4O encourages farmers to rediscover indigenous (and incredibly nutritious) fruits and veggies that may have been abandoned in favour of corn and other monocrops.

It can be easier to grow
In general, organic farming is designed to improve soil and water quality. O4O relies on cost-effective organic farming techniques that can bring even dry patches of land back to life.

WHY ORGANIC

HOW YOU CAN HELP
It’s not every day that you visit a prison to check on its progress toward sustainable agriculture. I’m a bit nervous as we drive there the following morning, but I know O4O doesn’t limit its efforts to training centres or schools. The O4O team is proving that healthy food should benefit every part of society, from orphanages to slums to prisons. With their assistance, prisons in Kitale have become home to organic gardens and nutrition seminars for both prison staff and inmates.

First, we’re shown around a women’s prison by Joyce Juma, one of O4O’s Organic Agricultural Trainers (OATS). OATS are key to O4O’s efforts. With support and funding from O4O, each OAT manages one or more community projects after graduating from a two-year training program. Joyce, for example, focuses on reaching out to women’s prisons, where, according to organics4orphans.org, she’s basically “become a part of the furniture.”

When I think “prison,” my imagination conjures cold cells and gloomy hallways. At the women’s prison in Kitale, we’re greeted by row upon row of flourishing leafy green veggies being tended to by inmates. It’s so different from my expectations that the whole experience is surreal. I’m blown away by the passion and enthusiasm of the women, who sing and dance during our visit. This is clearly one of the most positive things in an otherwise challenging life.

Next, we head to a men’s prison. Like any proud farmer, one inmate shows off a massive watermelon he’s just harvested. The discomfort I’ve been battling since we arrived at the first prison fades, replaced by awe and appreciation for the people we’ve met.

O4O’s goal is to put power back in the hands of the community. That’s very clear at our prison visits. Beyond merely growing food, the inmates seem to be growing a sense of purpose and pride in what they’re producing.

In 2015, the United Nations agreed to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): basically, a plan to create a better world with less poverty and more progress toward global well-being by 2030. A recent report released by Bill and Melinda Gates paints a sobering picture of the SDGs, suggesting that we probably won’t hit every target.

The good news? The Gateses emphasize that investing in the fight against poverty has a definite impact. This means that organizations like O4O, which empower communities to increase their own health and productivity, are more important than ever.
It seems fitting that our O4O adventure ends with a celebration. I feel elated and inspired (and slightly exhausted) by witnessing the work O4O is doing, and I can’t wait to share the experience with friends, family, and the rest of the alive team.

The celebration is actually a graduation ceremony for newly minted OATS, but it feels more like a party than a stuffy school function. There’s a talent show that I don’t totally understand. There’s a lot of dancing. There’s cake, which I’m told is a rarity. And there are colourful decorations everywhere, with each graduate receiving a bright garland to mark their achievements.

It’s an honour to have been invited—and an even greater honour to speak at the event. I’m brought up on stage, where I tell the graduates that their stories might just appear in the pages of a faraway magazine called alive.

As the grads play music and dance, I know I’ve fallen a little more in love with this continent. Africa is an explorer’s land with endless secrets to uncover and countless stories to tell. I’m incredibly grateful to be a part of O4O’s story, and by the time you read this, we will already be implementing much of the growth plan we worked on during our trip.

Bye for now, Kenya. I’ll be back.

Ryan Benn is the President of Alive Publishing Group and Publisher of alive. He’s a driven, devoted, and bold entrepreneur, as well as an avid cook, mountain biker, and downhill skier.