



## One Acre Fund with COMON Foundation Diligence Trip Report

### Rwanda

### July 4-7, 2022

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- Larry Gilson

#### One Acre Fund Staff

- Andrew Youn – CEO and founder
- Eric Pholman – Rwanda country director
- Belinda Bwiza – Rwanda deputy country director
- Jean-Pal Gisa – Rwanda tree program lead
- Pierre Nshimyumuremyi – Rwanda tree operations lead
- James Ellison – Rwanda agriculture product research lead
- Chelang’at Surum – Rwanda government relations and policy manager
- Margaret Vernon – Impact director (1AF-wide)
- Akifumi Kita – partnerships director, North America
- Robert Amelung – Europe business development director

#### COMON Foundation Staff

- John Loudon – Executive director
- Julia de Groot – Granddaughter of founder

#### Executive Summary

The objective of this trip was to observe One Acre Fund (1AF) programs at the farm and research levels in Rwanda with a special emphasis on the tree planting programs, as well as interacting with key NGO-wide and Rwanda 1AF leadership. This return visit to Rwanda for Focusing Philanthropy was a priority because of Rwanda’s central role in the tree planting initiative through its scale of operations (and therefore percentage of the total 9 country program) and its role as a source of innovation and experimentation as a prelude to broader multi-country rollout. The trip also afforded an opportunity to spend substantial time with 1AF and COMON Foundation leadership. COMON is a significant contributor to the tree planting initiative through FP.

## Key Observations

### 1AF-wide

- It is obvious that the organization continues to have the capacity to scale both the number of farm families reached and the magnitude of impact achieved. The strength of key personnel up and down the ranks was notable, with clear, common embrace of shared goals.
- Andrew Youn stated the objective of serving 10% of the ~100 million families worldwide living on less than \$1/day by 2030 through a combination of direct 1AF program delivery and partnerships (mainly with national governments). This scale would represent an approximate tripling of reach from current levels.
- Achievement of the scaling goals is anchored on further expansion of the tree planting program and substantially increasing the 1AF program presence in Nigeria. Nigeria is home to about 1/3 of all small holder farmers in Africa addressable through 1AF programs. The other 2/3 are divided about equally between east Africa (Victoria Basin countries + Malawi) and Ethiopia.
- To help achieve this goal, 1AF seeks to double its impact per philanthropic dollar over the next 3-4 years.
- The continued emphasis on product and process experimentation at 1AF-run research stations before staged rollout with small numbers of farmers then larger farmer engagement, followed by data collection, analysis and program refinement remains core tactics for increasing program efficacy within and across countries. The practical application of this discipline was evident throughout the visit and at all levels in the organization.

### Rwanda – government/1AF relations

The strength and growth of the 1AF program in Rwanda is clearly built on a robust, positive relationship with the country's government. 1AF has helped the relevant ministries dramatically expand the number and reach of their agricultural extension agents. Notably, 1AF is the largest private employer in Rwanda.

There is active engagement between the government and 1AF research and government relations staffs regarding seed sourcing, farmer agricultural practices (e.g., use of fertilizer, tree species selection, seedling production and distribution, etc.). It appears that this interaction is generally quite positive and mutually respectful though, inevitably, there are occasions when the government and 1AF have different views. In those instances, 1AF is generally able to make its case through the presentation of evidence flowing from its research stations, staff expertise, and farmer/extension agent feedback.

### Rwanda – 1AF program

The original means of sourcing tree seedlings was via centralized 1AF nurseries. While this was efficient from a production and quality control perspective, it created some logistical challenges. Because seedlings need to be planted at the beginning of the rainy season to have the best survival rate, and because the start of the rains is inevitably unpredictable, the challenge of modifying already-arranged logistics to move seedlings to farmer-distribution sites to accommodate weather events was extremely difficult. With far more decentralized tree

nurseries located in immediate proximity to farmers, these logistical challenges can be eliminated. Seedlings can stay at the nursery until distribution days, triggered by the onset of rains. Accordingly, 1AF has pivoted to decentralized nurseries for the main tree species and will soon have over 1,000 such nurseries blanketing the country.



*One of ~1,000 community nursery managers, 2022 is her second year in that role. She had participated in the 1AF core program for several years before applying for and being selected as a nursery manager.*



*Typically for decentralized nurseries, these workers, who are paid*



*by the nursery manager whose economic arrangement with 1AF anticipates such added labor costs, are preparing 10,000 seedling packets. Seeds will be planted soon so seedlings will have germinated and grown ready for distribution when Fall rains come.*

As 1AF pivots to decentralized nurseries for the most frequently distributed and planted species, prominently including grevillea, the centralized nurseries are being repurposed to be the source of fruit and nut trees where seedling production is a far more complex and protracted process, involving growth of root stock and the grafting of cuttings from mature fruit or nut trees to the root stock.



*Macadamia root stock being grown from nut, with small seedling being transplanted to these seedling packets to grow further, in anticipation of grafting.*





*A cutting from a mature macadamia tree is grafted on to root stock grown in the 1AF nursery. The entire process from planting a macadamia nut through distribution of the grafted seedling takes ~15 months.*



*Avocado seedlings after being grafted on to root stock. This nursery is growing about 400,000 of these seedlings through a 12-month process.*



All elements of the 1AF program are built around collaborations among neighboring farmers. The FP field diligence always includes meetings with groups of farmers. On this trip, there were two farmer meetings. Each meeting included a discussion of the 1AF program from the farmers' perspective. The strongest expressed desire was for more seedlings to be available per farmer and for species other than grevillea being made available at reduced cost or for free. It is notable that in contrast with their attitude 4-5 years ago when there was skepticism about the tree program, there now seems to be universal adoption and strong demand for more seedlings. Each of the group meetings was followed by a walking tour around adjacent farm plots, conducted by leaders among the local farmers with local 1AF staff and government agricultural agents also participating.



*Farmer meeting*

In order to understand what happened to the timber-species trees (particularly grevillea) that were harvested when mature and not used in local construction, we visited boat builders and a lumber mill/furniture factory in the catchment area of the farmers with whom we met. Grevillea is in especially high demand because it is used to build boats used by local fishermen in the large lakes in western Rwanda.





*Boat builders. Nearly the entire boat is built from grevillea.*



*Many local and imported tree species are converted into lumber for construction and furniture. The mill manager told us that he welcomes more locally grown trees as it supports the local economy and reduces his logistics costs.*





*The lumber mill, furniture making activity, and adjacent upholstery shop are all housed in a government financed complex employing several hundred workers who include both experienced craftspeople and apprentices.*

Many variations of species and planting and cultivation strategies are tested at 1AF's multiple, Rwandan research stations. We visited the largest of these and observed testing of different inter-cropping techniques, underplanting experiments, use of different seed/fertilizer injection devices, chicken farming, and other techniques.



*Walking through a stand of maize to see the effects of different insecticides being tested to combat pests.*