

Village Visits

As part of my work with Awamu Biomass Energy I traveled by motorcycle, overcrowded taxis, or buses to distant villages and towns surrounding Kampala, the capital city of Uganda. Throughout approximately two weeks I traveled a large, unknown number of kilometers along with Robert, my companion from Awamu, who acted as both my guide and translator but inevitably became a friend along the way. We traveled to seventeen villages and interviewed twenty individuals speaking with leaders of the households who spoke for a total of around one hundred people. In addition we spoke with local leaders and social worker, small micro-entrepreneurs, and community health advocates. In order to streamline our meetings and communication we would work to have an active line of communication open with the individuals in advance to our meetings. However, as we all know, things do not always go according to plan. There was a day where we traveled four hours and spend around 40,000 UGX (about ten dollars) only to arrive to a woman's house and have her call and tell us she had left for the week and would not be returning. We left the village disappointed, confused, and a little bit angry but such a story was not uncommon. There are many things we have in the United States that we all take for granted, one which I was not aware of until my trip to Uganda was precise addresses. The absence of these combined with the lack of a thorough user recording system in place at Awamu led to every meeting being a slight shot in the dark. All we had at our disposal was usually a phone number and, if we were lucky, a village. No two days spent visiting users were the same. Some days we would travel hours and hours to speak to two individuals the entire day, others we spoke with four in two hours. The variance in experience was incredible and made the entire process all the more worthwhile and interesting. Working with Robert, who was only a few years older than I was also an invaluable opportunity, he helped to crush any language barriers and allow for an open flow of conversation between the users and myself. I cannot think of another time when I have worked in such a close team with struggles even comparable to those we had: riding a motorcycle in the rain, becoming lost on unmarked dirt roads, having to fight consistent price gouging, the list goes on. Each and every village we visited was a unique opportunity in its own. Sometimes my presence was welcomed with open arms and even the offer of food or gifts (and once, a wife) whereas other instances saw our mission met with confusion and distaste for this foreigner coming into their village, but this was much more rare. I witnessed many sights that are the cliché for "poverty porn" advertisements such as malnourished children drinking obviously tainted water. However I won't preach on how much my perspectives have changed because that would be redundant and self-serving, rather I would like to say a few words on how Uganda has much to teach our country. The people here are more open, more warm, and more loving than perhaps anywhere I have ever been, if we all took the time out of our day to talk about how we feel, to greet a stranger, and to catch up with a neighbor or old friend our country could be much better for it. What Uganda lacks in monetary wealth they make up for in richness of spirit.