

## **Sunflowers for Opac**

Because its annual per capita income is less than \$825, Uganda is designated as a red state by the United Nations Millennium Development Goals to eradicate extreme poverty worldwide by 2015. Ochan Self-Help Alliance, Inc. [a 501 (c)(3) charity] was founded to serve as a partner in the resettlement effort of war-displaced citizens in Opac Village, Northern Uganda. The mission of this Alliance addresses several of the Millennium Development Goals:

**Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger**  
**Empower women**  
**Ensure environmental sustainability.**

War-displaced people in northern Uganda are returning to their rural communities that have been razed by war—their homes burned, granaries sacked and harvests stolen, their health and welfare diminished by living in close quarters for years in the unsanitary and social chaos of internally Displaced Persons' (IDP) camps. What minimal economic resources these returnees had are gone. They walk home empty-handed to start again after a war they were not a party to: there is no FEMA-type of safety net to help them.

Opac villagers fled several years ago to IDP camps to hide from the cultic Joseph Kony and his Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) rebels. The rebel leader's brutal tactics were aimed at exposing the impotence of the current government to protect its citizens. Opac Village, located in Abako sub-County in Lira District, became a target of rebel attacks and occupation during the war years. They used the local primary school as their base camp where they burned desks, chairs, and books as firewood, fouled the pit latrines, and blasted with mortar fire the walls of classrooms. Thousands of school-age children were abducted and recruited into rebel ranks; the girls were turned into sex slaves for rebel officers; thousands more in all age-groups were killed mostly at the sites of rebel attacks in villages since the start of the war in 1986. Despite the generosity of international aid, life in IDP camps was rough: children's education was nominal, and as many as six out of ten women reported cases of forced sexual abuse against them. Both in and outside the camps, women in northern Uganda still lack the economic clout needed to resist these sexual assaults and to face the consequent loss of the shelter and livelihood provided by their partners.

Now, an estimated 4,500 households, told that hostilities have receded across the border, are walking back home empty-handed from IDP camps to resettle on their ancestral land. Promised resettlement packets including building materials, seeds, hoes and blankets were not distributed to them on leaving the camps. Composed mostly of women-led or parentless families due to the loss of men through war or disease, the villagers are literally starting over. These "silent war victims" face a new set of agonizing dilemmas: they have no means to afford crop seeds, so they must get income by felling trees for quick trade in firewood and wood charcoal. Such actions, along with the massive rebuilding of traditional homes that require fresh wood and grass thatch, further threaten

their environment. Increasingly erratic weather due to climate change is a new threat to their hopes for food from their gardens.

After discussions with the local leaders and their community organization's leadership group of women farmers', the Alliance developed a project in green commerce for the women farmers. With the help of the Diocese of Maryland's 2010 Lenten Project, The Alliance's green commerce initiative hopes to supply women farmers with enough cash crop seeds to sow an acre each using high yielding hybrid sunflower seeds that mature in 3-month cycles. As many as 400 women, who have formed the Ocan Resettlement Women's Group to support each other's farming efforts, will receive the following: 1) a package of cash crop seeds (sunflower) that grow fast so can be planted in three different cycles of the rainy season for maximum harvest and financial return; 2) 15 pine seedlings per farmer to plant in order to protect the soil against erosion and loss of moisture in this semi-arid region; and 3) with lessons in best practices for planting growing, and harvesting for maximum yield and then for budgeting well the proceeds of their sale.

The Alliance is engaged in other critical areas of resettlement: installing the first health clinic ever in Opac, helping people build eco-friendly houses, fighting global warming through reforestation. For more information, please visit us online: [www.ochanalliance.org](http://www.ochanalliance.org).

'And I will bring again the captivity of my people of Israel, and they shall build the waste cities, and inhabit them; and they shall plant vineyards, and drink the wine thereof; they shall also make gardens, and eat the fruit of them. And I will plant them upon their land, and they shall no more be pulled up out of their land which I have given them, saith the Lord thy God.' *Amos 9:14-15*