

Review of *The Last Hunger Season*
By David Zarembka, Coordinator (dave@aglifpt.org)
African Great Lakes Initiative of the Friends Peace Teams
Lumakanda, Kenya



Gladys Kamonya and David Zarembka with a baby lamb
in front of their avocado tree

When I heard about Roger Thurow's book, *The Last Hunger Season: A Year in an African Farm Community on the Brink of Change*, I was anxious to read it because the four small scale farmers it covers live 30 km and 50 km from where my wife, Gladys Kamonya, a Kenyan, and I, an American, have our home. Moreover we are also small scale farmers with $\frac{3}{4}$ of an acre of land and 3 cows, 2 calves, 2 sheep, one lamb, and about 30 chickens. Like the people in the book we grow maize, beans, greens, fruit trees, vegetables, and trees for firewood and shade. I also have a father-in-law and five sisters-in-law who are local farmers. The four farmers in the book were first-year members in a program called One Acre Fund that promotes better agricultural practices, particularly with maize, for farmers who have half to three or four acres. Three of my in-laws are members of the One Acre Fund plus another relative who lives here in Lumakanda.

Thurow's following of the four individuals is an important correction to most media coverage of agricultural development in Africa. On the one hand, impersonal statistics are overly used and, on the other, small holder farmers are given short, snap-shot descriptions at the beginning of an article or report that illustrates the points the author wants to make. In Thurow's case we follow these farmers between their ups and downs, successes and failures over the 2011 growing season. As a result, we care about, are concerned about how these people will fare. Will the good student be sent home for school fees and be unable to continue his education? Will the rains be sufficient for the crops, but not too much to? The book illustrates the difficulties that small-scale famers face, but also their resilience in overcoming these difficulties.

By focusing on the agricultural improvements made in this year by these four first time members of the One Acre Fund, Thurow convincingly demonstrates that attention, education, and proper support can significantly increase food production. This confirms his thesis that small holder farmers can fill in the gaps needed for increased food production in Africa. This is in stark contrast to the conventional wisdom that only large scale, mechanized commercial farming, which has promoted the “land grabbing” in many parts of Africa by foreign countries and businesses, is the route to food self-sufficiency in Africa. He also tackles the concept that agricultural development for small scale farmers is, in the long run, much more effective than continuing food aid, which is no more than a band-aid for a specific, but recurring, crisis.

In the prologue, Thurow states (page xiii), “It was this discordant fact that brought me to the hardscrabble homesteads of western Kenya, a paradoxical region of breathtaking beauty and overwhelming misery.” Really! “Hardscrabble” is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “being or relating to a place of barren or barely arable soil” and “getting a meager living from poor soil.” Bungoma County in western Kenya below Mt Elgon has some of the most fertile soil in Africa and rainfall of over 125 cm per year. There is no way this area can be considered “barren.”

As to “misery,” I started out my African journey in 1964-65 teaching Rwandan refugees in a camp in northwestern Tanzania and recently visited Kakuma Refugee Camp in arid northwestern Kenya. I know what “misery” is and it certainly isn’t here in this region. When I return to Kenya from my trips to up-country, rural Rwanda, Burundi, and eastern Congo, I feel like I have returned to the Garden of Eden.

The Luhya of western Kenya, like most Kenyans, are an extremely warm, friendly, hospitable people. Nowhere is this conveyed in the book where the African farmers and their families are seen through the prism of hunger in Africa. This is cultural. Affluent westerners live in a mindset of scarcity – there are not enough funds, not enough of anything, when, yes, surely there is more than enough. People in the United States use this as an excuse to not tackle problems such as hunger and inadequate housing in the US. Kenyans, on the other hand, count their blessings and are willing to start projects without all the funding secured because they have an optimistic faith in humanity and in the future, that many Westerners lack.

Thurow writes, (page xviii), “Incredibly, much of rural Africa is the same today as it was in the 1930’s” and (page xix) “Kenya’s, and Africa’s smallholder farmers toil in a time warp, living and working essentially as they did in the 1930’s.” I wasn’t around in the 1930’s but my father-in-law, David Okemba, born in 1923, was and he has told me that when he grew up *ugali* (a thick mush) was made from millet and not maize. Millet has advantages over maize in that it is drought resistant, but does give a smaller yield. More importantly maize *ugali* is filled with starch and millet *ugali* is not so that one of the major health problems in the region is diabetes from eating starchy maize *ugali* two or three times per day for a lifetime. When a person does develop diabetes, he or she must turn to eating millet *ugali*.

It was around the time of independence in the 1960’s that Kenyan farmers began planting hybrid maize which Thurow implies is a new development. My cousin-in-law, Shem, was at that time one of those extensive workers who encouraged and taught Kenyan small holder farmers how to grow

hybrid maize and substantially increase their yields. Therefore what Thurow thinks is a new innovation has been around for decades. The “brink of change” that he postulates is really his own personal observations and learning over the year.

Thurow considers his four Kenyan farmers to be American-like rugged, individualistic families competing in the harsh world all by themselves. But Africans, particularly those in rural communities, live by the *ubuntu* philosophy – “I am because we are and, since we are, I am.” (John Mbiti) This leads to mutual cooperation and inter-dependence. Thurow mentions instances of this a number of times in the book but does not seem to realize its significance. For example, either by design or inadvertently, the One Acre Fund assigns its farmers to groups of ten to twenty who then are not only taught together, but also plant and do other agricultural tasks communally. On page 209 Thurow mentions a common practice of merry-go-round where the members of the group put in a certain small amount of money and the total amount collected is given to one of the members. This is then repeated for the next week for another member and so on until each member has received his or her large payout. Two of my family members have a One Acre Fund merry-go-round which they use to pay off their debt to the One Acre Fund for seeds, fertilizer, and other inputs. While Thurow’s thesis in the book is that there is a hunger season in May and June while the crops are growing but not yet ready for harvest, he does not indicate why the One Acre Fund – unlike the commercial farmers in Kenya who pay back their loans after harvest – must repay their loans during the “hunger season” and not after they have harvested. One of my relatives withdrew from the One Acre Fund after one year partly for this reason. Another example is the first year before our neighbor joined the merry-go-round, she had great difficulty repaying the loan on time. Another example of *ubuntu* in the book recounts how when the harvest does come in for one of the farmers, relatives and neighbors from nearby come to help him harvest his half an acre which is completed in a short time.

Thurow notes (page 47), “Bungoma County, which includes the surrounding countryside, was the third most populous in the country with nearly two million people.” A quick look at the internet shows that the actual number is 1,375,063. On page 71, he says, “The treatment [for malaria], a regiment of tablets, cost six hundred shillings.” Actually malaria medicine is free and the pharmacist is given 20/- for handling the order. Like these two examples, many of the statistics and monetary amounts reported in the book seem inaccurate to me. As a result, while Thurow credits the One Acre Fund with progress, the book can in no way serve as an analysis of the One Acre Fund and my comments in this review should not be taken as reflective of the results of the One Acre Fund.

All this is disappointing because Thurow is correct that small scale farmers have been neglected in Africa since independence fifty years ago. These farmers can now, with current practices, frequently improve their output two or three times, but it is also true that many small scale farmers -- like my wife Gladys who obtains the goal of 20 bags of maize per acre – already farm well. There is no doubt that Kenya and Africa can easily feed itself, but it is much more complicated than getting farmers to adopt the current best practices. Resources need to be put into developing drought and disease resistant plants with higher, more nutritious yields. Then these improvements need to be accepted by the farmers and scaled up to cover the planting needs of the farmers. Finally adequate marketing systems need to be developed that appropriately benefit the farmers and move the surplus to the cities and towns where it will be consumed.