

Sustainability Lessons from African Christian College's Tree of Life Project



sustainability - the ability to secure stable and sufficient long-term financial resources, and to allocate them in a timely manner and appropriate form, to cover the full costs of the organization.

THE TREE OF LIFE STORY

The first students of Manzini Bible School in Swaziland began their training in 1967. Primarily supported by a USA congregation, the school and its farmland survived, but struggled. By 1995, the supporters were ready to sell the property and close the school but one leader maintained hope. His efforts, with the help of many others, led to the development of the Tree of Life Project – a macadamia orchard on the campus property – in 1997 to become a “living” financial endowment for the school.



Many macadamia trees have been planted since the first seedlings. Significant resources have been spent on growing, caring, and maintaining the orchard of over 14,000 trees. As the orchard has grown, so has the school. Brought under the oversight of a board of trustees in 2007, the school changed its name to African Christian College and cast a vision as a Christian higher education institution. It continues to grow and seek ways to best serve the changing church in Africa. ACC is in the process of earning global accreditation for its Bachelor of Theology degree programme.

Today, the orchard provides work to eight full-time employees, a dozen temporary employees, and three dozen students. And, after 15 years of investment, the orchard is finally producing a harvest large enough to begin contributing financially to the future of African Christian College.

CHOOSING MACADAMIAS

African Christian College had 200 hectares of land that hadn't been cultivated in over 20 years. A missionary farmer began a farm on the property in 1968, but had two years of mild success. The land remained untilled until 1996 as plans to rent the land for farming began. However, a South African Christian farmer who was converting his land into a macadamia orchard, gathered soil and weather data from campus, and recommended the college grow macadamias, too. Money was raised for the project – first at Africans Claiming Africa in 1997 – from African and USA congregations and, with the help of this new orchard farmer, the Tree of Life Project was born.

Macadamia growing was just becoming popular in Southern Africa. African Christian College's campus was suitable in size, shape, weather, and resources for this new export crop. Today, Southern Africa is the world's leading producer of macadamia nuts. Most of African Christian College's macadamia nuts are sold directly to a high-end grocery chain called HEB Central Market in Texas, USA.

SUSTAINABILITY LESSONS

1 SECURE LOCAL RESOURCES BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

Churches and mission organizations should seek stable and sufficient long-term financial resources from local sources before the threat of losing funding from outside.



2 USE YOUR ASSETS

Identify resources (expertise, land, labor, time) you already have and find ways to use it for producing revenue.

3 DO WHAT WORKS

Find things that earn money and are needed in your community.



FACING CHALLENGES

The Tree of Life has been filled with challenges, mistakes, and new problems arise regularly. The biggest challenge came on 11 Sept 2001 when an early morning fire killed over 400 trees and devastated the orchard.

Mistakenly, the grass between trees had been allowed to grow uncut becoming a wick for the fire to quickly spread all the way down a row. The farm was not equipped with access points for water nor fire-fighting equipment to put out the fire. Today, the orchard is mowed, fire breaks are burned, has multiple water access points and a fire cart.

Other mistakes include securing inadequate equipment, poor planning, and polluted water sources. These mistakes reduce the ability to harvest usable nuts for earning revenue. Now, the leadership utilizes the services of certified macadamia experts, replaces equipment, fixes what can be fixed, and tries to plan carefully to reduce negative consequences.

ENSURING ONGOING SUCCESS

Managing an orchard of 14,000 trees is no small task. It requires year-round attention. The orchard staff works daily fertilizing, watering, harvesting and pruning trees to ensure a healthy, plentiful harvest. They also work repairing equipment, keeping bees, maintaining finances, and working with partners in cracking, roasting, packaging, and delivering nuts.

The college invests in the development of the Tree of Life staff to improve their performance. This includes attending workshops, participating in macadamia nut associations, hosting fire-fighting lessons, and providing learning materials to increase success. We evaluate employees, products, equipment and methods to improve our annual harvest.

MAKING AN IMPACT IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Tree of Life Project doesn't exist simply as a business to make money. It is a business of African Christian College and a tool to accomplish the mission to glorify God by equipping students for excellent service in His Kingdom.

Increasing and maintaining income from the Tree of Life project is part of African Christian College's sustainability plan. The college grows much of the food served in its cafeteria, seeks payment from students and maintains relationships with donors and potential donors. An investment in the success of the Tree of Life Project is an investment in the college's mission.

The growing, harvesting, processing, roasting and sale of macadamia nuts leads to African Christian College's ability today and in the future to prepare visionary leaders to serve, grow, and strengthen the church in Africa.



4 PLAN CAREFULLY

Before embarking on a major project, research to find the best methods for success. In some cases, it is necessary to find a true expert to help with planning.

5 PREPARE FOR THREATS

The unexpected can happen, but many costly mistakes can be avoided by preparing for them ahead of time.



6 INVEST IN SUCCESS

Successful ventures require equipped staff, adequate tools, and commitment from the leadership.

7 EVALUATE + IMPROVE

Look for ways to improve efficiency, increase income and reduce costs.

8 REMEMBER THE MISSION

Don't forget the reason sustainability efforts exist: to continue growing the Kingdom of God.

