Mukwano emerged from five years of travel between Australia and Uganda as part of our work with organic farming communities. Mukwano aims to support these communities in gaining access to health care services, including public health and medical services. Our first project is a health clinic in south-west Uganda; when completed, it will assist communities that now travel over 20 kms (mostly by foot) to access health and medical services. In 2008, we celebrated Mukwano by joining Friends of the Earth Australia as an affiliate member.

Our name ‘Mukwano’ means ‘a friend’ in Lugandan, one of the local dialects in Uganda where Mukwano’s first health care project has been established. The name reflects the emergence of our organisation from a friendship between a group of Australians and the organic farming community in Uganda.

Our connection with organic farming communities in Uganda started as part of an Australian Research Council research project to evaluate the impacts of globalising organic food chains for smallholder farmers in Africa. As the demand for organic produce has continued to expand, African organic farmers have become increasingly integrated in global commodity chains. This has provided some farmers with opportunities to access new markets, increase household incomes, as well as increasing crop production and crop diversity. These circumstances have brought increased food security and other livelihood benefits for some African farmers (Lyons and Burch, 2007).

However, the extension of export agriculture across Africa has also further tied farmers to vulnerable international markets and inequitable trade rules. Critics argue that any market-led approaches for the development of African agriculture – including organic market-led approaches – are short-sighted. Our research has examined these tensions, and the likely long-term outcomes for African organic farmers.

The future of farming in Africa

Despite some of the limitations associated with the expansion of organics in Africa, a recent United Nations report identified organic farming as an environmentally and socially resilient farming system, and one that makes a vital contribution towards ensuring global food security. Similarly, a recent report published by the International Assessment of Agricultural Science and Technology Development concluded that the way the world grows its food – including high tech and reductionist farming – would have to change radically if the poor and hungry are to be better served (IAASTD, 2008).

However, at the same time that recognition of organics as a tool for development in Africa continues to grow, high-tech and expensive approaches to agricultural development are also being wheeled out across the continent. A number of actors are now rallying support for the spread of genetically engineered crops, and over US$262 million has been committed to this through the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA).

Despite AGRA’s claims that green revolution technologies will be vital for building food security and resilience to climate change in Africa, the introduction of genetic engineering and other high-tech farming options is set to exacerbate the social, economic and environmental problems facing African communities – just as they did alongside the Green Revolution in India decades earlier (Mittal and Moore, 2009). In this context, on-going support to organic farming communities in Africa is vital.

Improving health services

One of the significant issues facing organic farming communities that has emerged from our research relates to access to health care services. Most farmers (both organic and conventional) live in regional and remote locations and health services are a long distance away. With limited access to resources with which to travel, health care remains out of reach for many. It is in this context that the first Mukwano project was born.

Mukwano is working collaboratively with African organic farming communities to support the delivery of locally appropriate health care services. Our charter identifies the specific challenges for smallholder organic farmers, as well as the diverse and specific health care needs and priorities of women and men.

Mukwano’s current project is located in Katuulo, a remote
rural community in the Kyazanga Sub County of Uganda, about 300 kms south west of Kampala. Here we are supporting the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Co-operative to build, staff and maintain a health care centre. Twenty-five organic farm families, members of the organic farming cooperative, as well as the surrounding community will access this health care centre. There are currently at least 1500 households in the Katuulo parish, including nearly 2000 children less than five years of age. This project is so important to the local community in Katuulo; many women still die during childbirth, and there are high rates of malaria and HIV amongst the local population.

Mukwano has been assisting the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Co-operative in a number of ways, including fundraising efforts to support the construction and maintenance of the health care centre, facilitation, as well as negotiation with export companies and government representatives. We work closely with members of the Co-operative to ensure the centre will meet the health needs of the community, as well as supporting local community members to develop essential skills so they can be involved in many aspects of the centres’ construction, operation and management. It is the aim of both Mukwano and the Katuulo Organic Pineapple Co-operative that the health care centre is locally owned and locally managed.

Construction of the building is now complete, including installation of a 10,000 litre water tank. A good wet season has filled the tank, and the harvested water currently provides safe drinking water to Co-op members. The Co-op and Mukwano are now finalising furnishings for the centre. On our most recent visit to Uganda in February 2009 we also met with health and government officials who have agreed to assist in supplying a fridge for the storage of vaccines and other medical supplies. A government health
Want to get involved?

Mukwano supports the Katuulo health care centre via a range of fundraising activities in Australia. To date we have held fundraising dinners, sold calendars, received some grant funding from Aliamos as well as personal donations. We would like to make a special thanks to one of Mukwano’s special fundraisers, Rafi Lochert, who has worked tirelessly making beautiful ‘softies’ that she has sold across Melbourne. All monies raised go directly to the health care centre.

We welcome new supporters! Mukwano will be designing 2010 calendars, as well as organising fundraising dinners in Melbourne and Brisbane. Check out our website for details of these activities <www.mukwano-australia.org>. You may also like to make a donation via the FoE website <www.foe.org.au/donate>.

The Katuulo community have identified a number of fundraising priorities; a maize milling machine, a pit latrine, a microscope and mosquito nets. Perhaps your community group, family or friends would like to get involved in fundraising efforts for one of these priorities?
If you would like more information about Mukwano or the Katuulo project please visit our website, or contact Kristen Lyons at <kristen.lyons@mukwano-australia.org> or Sam Neal at <samantha.neal@mukwano-australia.org>.

References and more information:
* SoftPower health centre <www.softpowerhealth.org/the%20Uganda%20project.html>