



Global Energy Solutions e.V.

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Interview Volker Schlöndorff

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Bert Beyers: You made a documentary film called "The Forest Maker". The forest maker is Tony Rinaudo, an Australian agricultural economist. How did you meet?

Volker Schlöndorff: Just coincidence. I have been working in Africa with World Vision, a humanitarian organization, for 15 years without ever thinking about a film. One day I was invited to a lecture by Tony Rinaudo in Berlin. I didn't know him at the time, even though he had just received the so-called Alternative Nobel Prize in Stockholm. The lecture was about how to grow entire forests without planting a single tree. That impressed me so much that I went to him afterwards and asked him: You must have thousands of disciples who are now using your method all over Africa and all over the world where there is desertification, where the trees are disappearing. And then he said with a smile: Most of the time I'm alone. And I said: That has to change. Should I make a film about you? I have no idea what I was getting myself into. He grabbed my hand, shook it – and so I was now obliged to make a documentary.

What kind of person is Tony Rinaudo?

Very reserved, very modest. Actually the image you have of a missionary, he is also very religious. At the age of 25, he set off from Australia to Africa with his wife of the same age and a three-month-old baby and practically never came home again. The couple had three children in Africa who grew up in the village. And he has settled into village life with a humble modesty, so that the people there do not see him as an old white man, but as one of them. He also speaks the local dialect. So this is the image of this man who does not like to appear in public except to present his case. He is now doing this with great skill.

Then he is really rooted in the African community.

Yes, he spent 40 years in Africa, with interruptions and always in the Sahel. So from Senegal to Ethiopia, in Mali, in Niger, in Ghana. Even beyond Africa, because this dry zone stretches around our globe. He also worked in India. I also filmed it. He was in Indonesia, where it is about the reforestation of deforested forests.

How did he come to this?

As a boy, he read a book in which it was shown that the tree is, so to speak, the basic condition of our life. In the dry zones, the tree stabilizes the soil, against wind, against sandstorms. It also catches the rain. At the same time, the tree provides shade. Otherwise it is too hot on the ground for anything to grow. In addition, every tree is a biological pump. It brings water from the depths to the surface, which it distributes just below the ground in small-capillary roots. So it's a marvel. And that's why: All people want to plant trees and so Tony Rinaudo also went to Africa to plant trees. Today he says: Hundreds of millions of dollars from the World Bank: all for nothing, because the planted trees do not grow. And there is no monitoring either. All the people plant again and again, but what becomes of the plants is not reported.

Let's get to the method. You said earlier: Tony Rinaudo wants to build a forest without planting a tree. How is that supposed to work?

Yes, he was really desperate and experienced a real revelation, like from the Bible. That was when he broke down in the steppe with his car, he looked around: Everywhere after a downpour, a bit of green stuff sprouts from the ground. And then he thought: That's weeds. But now he looked at it, inevitably because of the breakdown, and recognized the shape of the leaves: This is a tree widespread in Africa. And that's another. From this he concluded: Tree roots from 30, 40, 50 years ago must still be alive in the ground. And so it is. And they keep sprouting what the foresters call cane rash. And it is enough to protect this small plant so that the next goat does not come and eat it away. So if you choose one or two of five or six shoots, tie a ribbon around them and make them clearly visible, red or blue, and protect these shoots – then after about three years you actually have a tree one and a half meters high. And Tony Rinaudo first used this method in Niger and elsewhere, and now seven to eight million hectares of fertile arable land have been created. And under and between these trees.

Trees and agriculture go together.

Tony Rinaudo is an agronomist. He went to Africa to help get agriculture back on track. Agriculture that was destroyed, partly by colonization, partly by the green revolution, when farmers were told: A good farmer must first have a clean field. In other words, hack away everything that is there. Exactly the opposite is the case: In these hot areas, about 40 trees per hectare are needed for agriculture to be possible underneath at all.

Tony Rinaudo has been doing this for several decades. What potential does this have?

The potential is enormous. He says Africa could feed itself, with the right methods. And that's why he never tires of spreading this method

via radio stations – which are still very important in Africa – also through lectures, through champion farmers, i.e. farmers who go to other villages. But it's still very slow. And the main obstacle, funnily enough, is that this method costs nothing. There is no money to be made.

What does that mean?

If you have a \$100 million program, such as the Green Wall through Africa, then governments are interested. Tony Rinaudo says he has not even seen cash come into a village in the 40 years. At best, a well will be financed and dug, also by Germany, GIZ or others. This already fails with electrification. The money goes into these major projects, but in the end they don't work. However, they work for the state treasury of the states and they work for all those who enrich themselves from them. And that's why Tony Rinaudo's method is not popular. He usually does not succeed in bringing someone from the Ministry of Agriculture to the villages. Unless you pay horrendous expenses, i.e. \$5,000 a day, plus a car for them and a companion and so on. And that's where this Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration fails.

How could these obstacles be overcome?

This is being worked on. My film should also make a contribution to this. There are international conferences, most recently in Bamako, Mali. This method is now used in 26 countries in Africa, but Africa is also insanely big: as big as the United States, Europe and Australia combined. And that's why the support is so important, as the Rotary Club is doing now, for which we are very grateful.

Is this method only suitable for arid areas or also for rainforests?

This is also done in the Amazon. Tony Rinaudo has big projects underway in the Indonesian rainforest. After all, reforestation has to be done there. In the meantime, however, people think that natural

reforestation brings more than planting. In the rainforest, certain areas are staked out so that the animals do not eat the flowers and buds. And then you select the plants and trees from what spontaneously grows there again in order to get a natural mixed forest again.

You made a film about Tony Rinaudo. What else can you do?

Promote it, find support for it, spread the good word, so to speak. My film is now being shown in African villages. We financed small generators so that it could be shown on a bed sheet in the evening. The scandal is that you have to put polluting Honda engines there again instead of using energy from the sun. 600 million people in sub-Saharan Africa have no access to electricity. After 60 years of development aid. In many villages, there is only one solar panel. There are 40 mobile phones attached to it for charging. But the village is in total darkness in the evening. From 6 p.m. onwards, the sun is gone and the children can no longer do their schoolwork, except with terrible sparkles. In addition to trees, I believe that electrification is the most important thing for development in Africa, especially through solar energy. We can support all of this. These are concrete projects. These are not the hundreds of millions in development aid that the states there live on, or the top 10,000. These are the methods that must be left to the farmers themselves, which can be given to the population themselves. And there is still a lot of help needed from the old white man, also from the young white man and also from yellow, green or blue men.

What is your personal conclusion from the encounter with Tony Rinaudo?

I was incredibly skeptical about the whole thing. Even when I drove through Africa with Tony Rinaudo, he always called me the incredulous Thomas. Because I asked the appropriate questions. And I learned from him that skepticism and cynicism don't get you anywhere. Every small step is a step forward and is better than doing nothing at all. He was often desperate himself and says today: Then I

learned that most good ideas take a long time to catch on, especially if they are very simple. People expect a complicated system, with a lot of technology and all kinds of things. But the future is often in a simple hoe, in a colorful ribbon that protects a plant. And that can make a lot more of a difference. And that's why I went to Africa as a pessimist and came back as an optimist. It's not just misery, it's not just misery, there is an incredible amount of joie de vivre and vitality. And it is also faith, trust and confidence in life. And that's enough to get ahead. Otherwise, I'm still not religious.