

# Tackling problems - rather than symptoms - in Africa

Henry Fell's article in the Royal Show Journal discussed the challenges for agriculture in Ethiopia and praised the work that FARM-Africa is doing there. Club member **Norman Coward** - a FARM-Africa Trustee - describes the charity's experience of tackling the problems, not the symptoms, in the African continent.

**M**ENTION Ethiopia and most people recall TV images of arid land with people and livestock dying of malnutrition. Like many African countries, Ethiopia is subject to dramatic climate changes and its annual growth in agricultural production is failing to match its growth in population, making for highly volatile food security.

In the short term, food aid gifted by the US, EU and others is a humanitarian necessity. However, with the mid-term review of the Common Agricultural Policy and likely WTO-induced changes in US



High-yielding tissue culture banana, producing more than five times the yield of local varieties.

support programmes, 'surplus grain' will not be so readily available in the future.

More importantly, food aid is certainly not the long-term answer. It tackles the symptoms, not the problem, and it creates a culture of dependency.

Ethiopia is an agriculturally-driven society, with 90% of its 65 million population dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. However, with a population growth rate of 2.8% a year and an agricultural production growth rate of 1.5%, a crisis is waiting to happen.

Lack of finance for improved inputs and technology, the need for wood for cooking and building, as well as continued soil erosion, are all contributing to low agricultural production. As a result, deforestation is still a major problem, hastening the loss of topsoil and contributing to the decline in rainfall.

International action is needed to tackle the fundamental problems of poorer African countries. And the needs vary from country to country.

In Ethiopia for example, there is a need for family planning information and for the encouragement of industry and, hence, industrial employment. This may provide the opportunity for exports other than coffee - virtually the only export at present - where income is highly volatile.

There is also a need for roads. Some places are 700-800 kilometres from Addis Ababa and require a three-to-four-day drive. Better roads would help the famine problem... food supplies are very expensive when they have to be trucked for days on end.

FARM-Africa tackles the problems, not the symptoms.

It's a British charity set up to work with poor farming communities to develop sustainable production, which will survive periods of famine. It works in Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, South Africa and - more recently - Uganda.

I had been vaguely aware of FARM-Africa's work for many years but only took a serious interest in the late 1990s when I visited Ethiopia for the first time. I was highly impressed

by its work... virtually all staff are agriculturalists and foresters.

There is just a small team in London, led by Dr Christie Peacock, who has worked in most of the areas FARM-Africa covers, has taught in the Agricultural University of Alemaya, in Ethiopia, and is a leading world specialist on ruminant livestock in impoverished African areas. Unlike other charities, FARM-Africa has very simple offices and administrative costs are low.

Some aspects of FARM-Africa's work are, surprisingly, of topical interest to UK farmers.

For example, it is currently managing a fund for the on-farm development of new technology from universities and research stations. One specific example is the dissemination of advice and inputs for the production of a variety of sweet potatoes, which have been bred to contain higher levels of Vitamin A. This variety provides health benefits, including the reduction of vitamin deficiency blindness in children.

In the same project, the market has been considered. The sweet potatoes may be eaten as a vegetable, or processed into dried sweet potato slices, through simple manual machines.

The project also includes a co-operative bakery and café where flour, made from the sweet potato slices, is used to produce excellent bread and cakes. In short, this is a whole food chain, owned and managed by farmers and their families, which takes basic research and develops it for wider use.

Another example is the dissemination of disease-free, high-yielding banana varieties to small-scale farmers in

Uganda. The project started in September 2002 and aims to promote banana tissue culture technology in an attempt to restore profitable production.

Bananas are an important staple crop in Uganda, but productivity has been declining because of disease and lack of improvements.

The planting materials are distributed through local farmers' associations, which establish a 'mother garden' and members are able to buy them at discounted rates. This programme is in its early stages but 1700 farmers have been provided with the plantlets and have been trained in the higher standards of management they require.

The programme has already yielded a big increase in production and most of that is consumed at home. Again, farmers are starting to add value and keep the margins for themselves by processing their own products... into juice, dried bananas for snacks and flour, and even banana wine.

Breeding livestock can also be a remarkably effective form of aid. Livestock require active inputs on the part of the recipient - and, as they reproduce, they can provide 'free' aid for another person.

FARM-Africa pioneered the idea of goat groups in the 1980s and now has them in four countries: Kenya, Tanzania, Ethiopia and, more recently, Uganda. The work

has two key components: improved animal breeding linked to a decentralised animal health system. It aims to reduce the poverty of very poor smallholder farmers by increasing the productivity of genetically improved dairy goats and the availability of animal health services.

Village communities select 20 of the poorest people, focusing particularly on women, with FARM-Africa providing two does for each person. One person is trained in basic veterinary skills. Another is trained in basic numeracy skills, with he or she

becoming the secretary, keeping records of numbers, births and veterinary treatments.

FARM-Africa also supplies a buck. Within three years or so, each person must repay two does, which then enables another group of 20 people and 40 goats to be established.

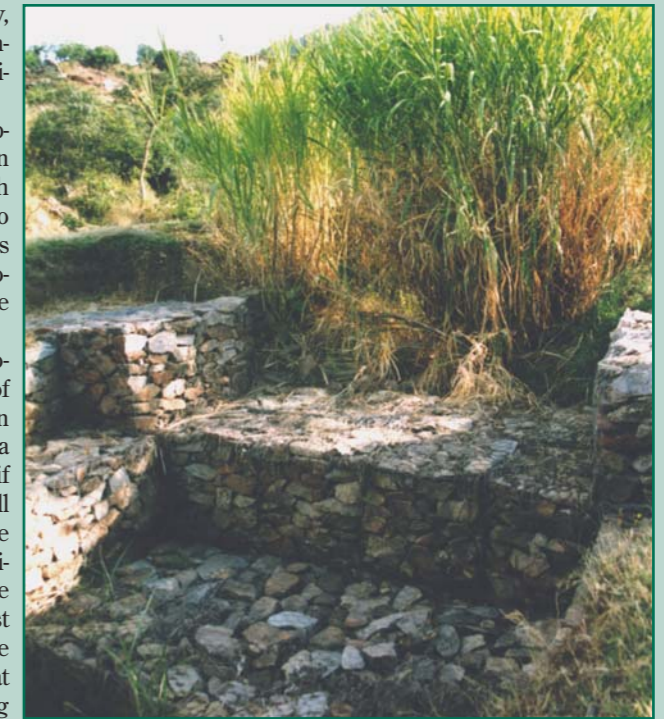
The goat milk provides a valuable source of nourishment for children and the goats provide a reservoir of food if drought strikes, as well as a tangible asset for the poorest members of society. And, because these are some of the poorest people with children, we can be pretty sure that the benefits are going where they are most needed, to sustain health and life.

Goat groups are a highly effective ingredient in an integrated approach to aid. They can only be established when the feed supply has been assured, and this includes very small-scale irrigation projects and the provision of inputs for fodder production. The goats are housed and provided with specially-grown feed, so they don't damage fragile ecosystems.

Each group has an 'insurance' fund into which FARM-Africa puts 10% of the value of the goats and the women put 5%. This fund is used to replace any goat which dies, but also acts as a micro bank that makes loans to any member who is temporarily short. It can also invest. One of the groups has now bought 200 chickens - 10 for each person. The eggs and meat are pooled for the community.

While FARM-Africa works to improve varieties of fruit, vegetables and livestock, it has long been concerned about deforestation. It's estimated that 200,000 hectares of forest are lost annually in Ethiopia as a result of logging for timber, fuel and clearing land for grazing.

To try to halt the decline in natural forests, FARM-Africa has established projects in Ethiopia and Tanzania, helping local villages assess forest resources and the demand for forest products, as well as agreeing boundaries marking the forest area and outlining village forest management plans. It has a reproductive health component helping forest communities to



Gully erosion plugged with local stone to slow the seasonal rush of water, with elephant grass planted in the trapped silt. The stone is raised each year until the gully is eliminated.

make choices about the size of their families and, thus, reduce the pressure on increasingly limited natural resources.

These examples show aid aimed at helping impoverished farming families, but in each case the families have to put in considerable effort themselves. The result is greater food security for 600,000 farmers, currently being supported by FARM-Africa.

The impact for Africa as a whole is minute, but the charity is increasingly using its grass roots activity as a model to spread experience from community to community and from country to country, thus increasing the pace at which new technology and good management practices are spread.

FARM-Africa has also been innovative in its fund-raising activities as those members of The Farmers Club who are Friends-of-FARM-Africa will be aware. In September 2004 it organised a sponsored climb of Mount Kilimanjaro, and is doing this again in September 2005.

Members interested in contributing to FARM-Africa's work can do so - with or without climbing Mount Kilimanjaro - by cheque to FARM-Africa at 9-10 Southampton Place, London WC1A 2EA.

• Norman Coward works in a non-executive capacity with Dairy Farmers of Britain, Centaur Grain Limited and Grosvenor Farms Limited, as well as being a Trustee of FARM-Africa. He was previously Agricultural Director of HSBC Bank.



Women take great pride in their goats, which provide money for them and food for the children.