

CANADIAN FUNDS HELP TURN BARREN LAND INTO CROP-BEARING EARTH

Fertile fields



STAFF PHOTO/KATHLEEN GRIFFIN

Rift Valley Children's and Women's Development Association program co-ordinator Shambel Gemechu shows the \$5,000 irrigation project paid for by the Canada Fund in this village.

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Their fields, once little more than dust, are now lush with growth. The onions, peppers, tomato, kale and cabbage sprouting from the farm plots will not only feed these villagers in Rift Valley (in the Ziway Region south of capital Addis Ababa), they will be sold at market so people can afford health care, livestock and school for their children.

A \$5,000 water pump, used for this small-scale irrigation program, has made a huge difference in the lives of the 47 farmers and their families who farm the 5.38 surrounding hectares.

"We have a better life, some income now," said Korsso Edao, a 39-year-old farmer who has benefitted from the project. "Families get sick, they can take them to hospital. Some even have nice houses in town. We can buy livestock, small sheep and goats. I was a wage labourer when I came here, not able to live or support my family. There are many, many farmers with no access to water."

This project was paid for by the Canada Fund.

A favourite program of Canadian Ambassador John Schram, the Canada Fund was created to help Ethiopians in rural villages with small, yet life-changing, improvements — roads, clean water, irrigation schemes, soil regeneration, schools, health posts. It is administered through the Canadian embassy, not CIDA or the Ethiopian government, so red tape is cut to a minimum.

More importantly, Canada Fund projects rely on the villagers themselves. They are paid — usually food for work — to build them, they are responsible for maintaining them and they must do that co-operatively by committee.

"If local communities want to do something to improve their situation, they don't have to wait for the government. They find a program like the Canada Fund and they can help themselves," Ambassador Schram explained. "What Canadian taxpayers are getting for their money is making a profound difference in people's lives and this society at the grassroots level."

Canada Fund projects must support gender equality and human rights, be environmentally safe and be viable over the long term. The fund supports a dozen projects a year.

These villagers have been taught how to organize into co-operatives. They share the extra work the pump creates, they have been trained in the pump's maintenance and have benefitted from workshops on how to manage their finances.

"Before we organized into groups, we were in poverty and weren't able to ensure we'd have food," explained Amane Bedana, 35, mother of seven. "Now we are paid for our service and there is a change in our life condition."

She told us her husband had recently taken on a second, younger wife, a common practice among Ethiopia's Muslim population.

"Now I stay here and work and she (the second wife) carries the water," she said, with

the faintest glimmer of a smile.

They harvest three times a year, yielding about \$60,000 Ethiopian birr each harvest, which translates into about \$7,500 Canadian, said Kibru Mamusha, Ethiopia's Canada Fund co-ordinator.

Money from the Canada Fund also helped establish a community cereal bank in Rift Valley that is, very unusually, run by women and supports 150 families. For less than \$20,000, an almost economic and drought-proof system has been set up, requiring members to contribute 25 per cent of their crops to the bank, but "borrowing" maize, beans and other grains when needed.

The women's committee has set up a granary and mill and they work daily grinding corn into flour. They are paid for their work, either in cash or in food.

While the equipment is primitive at best, supported by ladders and tables made from eucalyptus branches inside a small concrete building, the job gets done.

"The committee buys grain when it's cheap and brings it here. They sell it during the planting season, when the price is rising, for seed for crops or for food," Mr. Mamusha said.

"We don't need to talk a million dollars, or even a hundred thousand to make a significant difference," Ambassador Schram said.

"Canadians have forgotten that message. There's no sense saying it's so difficult we shouldn't even start. Better to get started now, encourage it and make these partnerships work."



STAFF PHOTO/KATHLEEN GRIFFIN

Members of the Boricha community care for more than 200,000 seedlings that will be planted in an attempt to regenerate and reforest land in one of several Canadian Foodgrains Bank projects in this area.

York Region farmers help African nation

BY KATHLEEN GRIFFIN
Staff Writer

Even in bad times, York Region farmers want to help.

Despite the fact last year could not be considered a great growing year, local farmers donated \$12,000 cash and \$8,000 worth of grain to feed people in developing nations, including Ethiopia.

"Although farmers had a hard time, they still have that commitment. They still want to help," said Terry O'Connor, head of the York Region chapter of the Canadian Foodgrains Bank.

That makes a difference.

With the Canadian International Development Agency matching donations on a four-to-one basis to a \$16 million cap, the total Canadian contribution last year was worth close to \$7 million and that's up 20 per cent from the year before.

"Famines have come and gone, but Ethiopians could always count on Canadian support," said Sam Vander Ende, the CFGB regional representative for East Africa, who is based in the Ethiopian capital of Addis Ababa.

"Farmers have an affinity for hunger. They know what they produce makes a difference in the world and that's immensely satisfying. We hear that over and over again," he said.

The CFGB is a Christian-based food aid organization that collects donations of cash and grain for the hungry all over the world. It's made up of 13 church-based groups, representing all major denominations, which work with international partners to distribute and monitor food security programs.

Sometimes, the aid is direct food relief in times of crisis, sometimes it supports food-for-work projects aimed at reducing dependence on aid. I saw one of those projects in the municipality of Boricha, near Awassa, about 150 miles south of capital Addis Ababa. After distributing emergency food for more than 30,000 people in 2001, CFGB partner Meserete Kristos Church is paying villagers with food for work on soil conservation and reforestation, including the care of 200,000 seedlings growing at a nursery.



SAM VANDER ENDE: Ethiopians can count on Canada for support, CIDA representative says.

"MKC looked at this situation and saved the lives of these people," said Fayisa Dasho, member of the village council charged with involving villagers in the maintenance of the project. Mr. Dasho also used the opportunity to make a pitch for further help: water.

Last year, with funds from another non-governmental association, workers dug a borehole to find water. They went down 333 metres, at a cost of \$1,000 a metre — to no avail. There's no water.

Women here walk four hours a day to Awassa Lake to fill their jugs and four hours back. This land has been in the villagers' families for centuries and no one can convince them to move. It's their home. It's their cycle.

"The plan is to help them not to go back to a relief situation," MKC relief co-ordinator Sahle-Mariam Mennamo said. "We're here to facilitate but we expect much from them."

"Nobody gets a free lunch, that's what we always tell them," added another aid worker in Mr. Mennamo's group.

In York Region, nine farms participate in the program, donating cash or dedicating a part of their land for CFGB grain.

"We feel very privileged to be involved with the program," Mr. O'Connor said. "We have so much compared with people in developing nations."

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