

# Conserving strength

## Canadian-backed projects assist Ethiopian communities in restoring agricultural stability

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A report on the front lines of Ethiopia's war with water

Ethiopia is at war — with water.

Sometimes, there isn't enough of it, such as last year during the El Niño-related drought. Other times, it rushes down bare and treeless hills and mountainsides, sweeping away the topsoil farmers need to grow food for their families.

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JOHN LONGHURST

Many Ethiopian villages have struggled with drought and famine in recent decades.

Fortunately, the country has what it needs to counter such destruction: rocks. Lots and lots of rocks, scattered across the fields as far as one can see.

The rocks make farming hard, but they are also an important ally in controlling erosion.

In the northern part of the country, Canadian Foodgrains Bank is working through its member, Canadian Lutheran World Relief (CLWR), and a local organization to build terraces and check dams to slow the rushing water and halt erosion. At the same time, it is supporting the rehabilitation of watersheds through tree planting — which also aids in the battle against erosion and, ultimately, hunger.

### **Terracing: an ages-old solution**

In sub-Saharan Africa, it is estimated land degradation due to events such as erosion cost the economy about \$68 billion per year. At the same time, more than 40 per cent of available cropland has had a decline in productivity in the last 20 years.

One way to battle this problem is through terracing, which prevents erosion, builds up and improves soil, and provides more water for crops.

Terracing in Ethiopia isn't new; it has been practiced by the people of the Konso region of the southwestern highlands for more than 400 years. But the idea of piling up rocks in rows along hillsides to hold back the soil is a relatively new practice in other parts of the country, such as the Lalibela area where CLWR is active.

"When the mountain and hillsides were covered in trees and the population was smaller, terracing wasn't as important," says Sam Vander Ende, the Foodgrains Bank field representative based in Ethiopia. "But deforestation, growth in population and the need to create more farms at higher elevations has resulted in the need for ways to prevent loss of scarce and precious arable land."

Much of the deforestation is the result of the need for firewood for cooking, construction or to make more farmland.

"It's hard to worry about future generations if you are so poor you don't know if you'll be able to eat today," Vander Ende says. "Nobody intended for this to happen. When life is hard, people have to make difficult choices in order to survive. It's only later that the bill has to be paid."

That is what happened to people living in Shumsha, a rural community near the city of Lalibela in northern [Ethiopia](#).

The future was bleak for drought-prone and poor Shumsha before it was selected in 2014 for a three-year, cash-for-work project supported by the Foodgrains [Bank](#) through CLWR and implemented by the Ethiopian branch of Lutheran World Federation.

Through the project, which is also supported by matching funds from the Canadian government, community members have been paid to build terraces and plant trees. They have also learned about conservation agriculture, a minimum tillage method that builds soil fertility, preserves moisture and improves **yields**.

### **‘Life was very difficult’**

Before the project, "our life was very difficult," Berniz Egen says during a meeting of some 15 people from the community responsible for maintaining its objectives.

"There was significant erosion, nothing was holding back the water. There was no vegetation in the hills, water was hard to find," she says, sitting with the others in a semi-circle beside a storage shed along a dirt road. Today, however, there is "no comparison" to the past; they are able to grow enough food to eat, even when there isn't enough rain.

"Now we have grass for livestock, the soil is stabilizing," Assafa Mihret says. "People are doing much better. They are able to buy sheep, goats and other household assets."

Adds Endalemu Meguarent: "Our crops are better, our children are learning how to maintain the soil, to protect it. We have a future for ourselves and our children now."

Along with those benefits, the efforts have also resulted in a rise in groundwater tables; two new springs have appeared in the hills, providing additional water to irrigate some 60 acres of crops.

The biggest sign of the changing fortunes came last year, during an El Niño-related drought, when, unlike such events in the past, it wasn't on the government's list of communities that needed food aid.

"Our harvest suffered, but we had better crops compared to other places," Meguarent says.

The renewed vegetation has also created a new business opportunity: beekeeping.

"Last year, I sold 300 kilograms of honey, much of it to the hotels that cater to tourists in Lalibela," says Morges Fanta, one of eight younger people in the community who are earning a good income selling honey.

"We are doing well, all because we are taking care of the watershed," he adds proudly. "Now we are able to lead a good life."

The community is in the midst of constructing a new small-scale water diversion (also through a cash-for-work program supported by the Foodgrains Bank). When complete, it will provide water for irrigation on year-round basis for an additional 80 hectares of crops.

### **Looking ahead**

At the end of 2017, Canadian funding for the project ends. Then what?

"I see a bright future," committee member Amari Desale says. "The land is coming back to life."

When support from the Foodgrains Bank ends, "we will maintain it because it is ours," he says, adding community members plan to continue to plant trees and convert more acres to conservation agriculture.

Tefera Hailu, a natural resource officer with the Lutheran World Federation who has worked with the community, says the project fills him with the pride.

"Before it was bare land, but now it produces food and people are eating better," he says. "They have access to grass for their livestock and for the roofs of their houses, they are selling their produce to local hotels.

"It makes me happy to see this, to see such good results."

Abdelkader Ibrahim, a food-security officer who has spent 30 years with the Lutheran World Federation agrees: "It was hard **work**, but something wonderful is happening here — so many lives have been impacted in such positive ways."

Whenever he gets discouraged, he says, "I think of the good **work** done here and many other places and it helps to keep me going."

## Foreign aid: making a difference through development

Canadians tend to think about the developing world mostly when disaster strikes — when drought, famine or war affects and imperils millions of people.

When that happens, sad and terrible images of suffering fill the media, as they are now about the great needs in Somalia and other parts of East Africa, Yemen, South Sudan, northern Nigeria and — for far too long — Syria.

When disasters hit, aid groups, supported by the Canadian government, respond by providing food, water, shelter and medicine.

While these large-scale needs and responses garner media attention, aid groups spend much of their time and resources doing development work. They do this without much fanfare on projects that help people improve their lives and become stronger and more resilient, enabling them to withstand and more quickly recover from shocks such as drought.

(War is another thing altogether; there is little that can be done to help people prepare for disruption and displacement due to conflict, except to work to lessen the possibility of fighting in the first place.)

One of the important areas groups such as the Canadian Foodgrains Bank focuses on is agriculture. In the developing world, 86 per cent of rural residents derive their livelihood from farming or farm-related work: 1 1/2 billion people, mostly small-scale farmers (five acres or less). More than 40 per cent of these farmers are women.

Despite hard work, these farmers have a hard time growing enough food for their families or to sell in local markets. Should drought or other disasters come, they can lose everything. By focusing on the agricultural sector, aid groups estimate the result will be crop increases of 20 to 30 per cent, lifting as many as 150 million people out of poverty and hunger, and enabling farmers to better deal with disasters.

That's what's happening in Ethiopia, where Winnipeg-based Canadian Foodgrains Bank has been working, through its member agencies, since 1983. In February, John Longhurst, director of communications and marketing for the Foodgrains Bank, toured projects in that country with colleague Sam Vander Ende to see the difference development projects focused on agriculture can make.