

Our Work

On the 14th & 15th of December was the “Capacity Building Training” which we have been working to prepare for the past three weeks. 30 partners of HelpAge Ethiopia attended. Many subjects to do with management, finance, reporting... were discussed. It is really important to listen to the local cultural which is very inclusive and participatory, everybody gets involved and has a say. What doesn't work well is a top down approach such as a teacher & classroom scenario.



Caro had a lot of useful teaching material from her previous job and we prepared 10 workshops. Most of the teaching was done by colleagues in the local Amharic language. Afterwards we were given a gift of a “Gabi” (traditional scarf) by the participants; it will come in very handy when we arrive at home in January! We are now working on follow up and other team building projects within the office.

HelpAge does not work at the front line which is all done by local groups or partners. We financially support them and also help with management & advice. Meeting partners and the work which they do is a deep experience. There are many true life stories which have to be seen to be believed. Below one random story of Bekale, who survived crippled under a bridge for 4 years. He was brought to one of our partners homes, cleaned, clothed and given a wheelchair.





The simple reality is that there are thousands and thousands of similar cases and many abandoned older people die alone, partially due to malnutrition and exposure. Traditional family structures are falling apart in the cities and children do not look after their old parents. The over stretched government has more urgent priorities. A HelpAge survey found that only half of the old people get any support from their family. Many are out on their own and gather homeless in groups on the pavement around churches and mosques. I have purposely refrained from taking photos of poverty because it is difficult, but daily you see many sights, which you would never imagine at home.

However you quickly learn to be pragmatic, you can't help everybody and have to focus on doing a little bit – perhaps (hopefully) it will make a difference - ? Begging is business here. From a distance you are recognised as a foreigner and a “Feranji Frenzi” starts. On our rural trip to Mount Wenchi everywhere the sight of a car creates excitement and children run to the road side, wave and cheer as we pass. Nearly always the waving hand becomes an open hand because since the great Ethiopian famine of 1984, NGO's have been handing out material assistance and people hope to receive a handout from white people. Note a “feranji” is a foreigner with white skin in Amharic.

There are five Amharic words to describe skin colour and people are sometimes referred to as “the light/dark skinned person.

Farming

Farming is divided into two tribes. Pastoralists with their herds of animals and a nomadic tradition and so called agriculturalist, who grow crops and are settled. Below is a herdsman lounging blissfully in a hot spring near volcanic mount Wenchi while minding his cattle in mid winter (25 °C). Irish cattle farmers battling the current winter snow would be very jealous - ?



The main crops grown are: teff, barley and false banana. Teff is an ancient cereal crop known only in Ethiopia and is the principal ingredient of Injera which is eaten at every meal every day. Injera is to the Ethiopians, what the humble potato is to the Irish. Grain is often ground at local water powered mills as shown below.



It is harvest time now and the whole countryside is carrying loads on their back. Women traditionally do the carrying. I was informed that two women carry as much as a donkey and two donkeys carry as much as one horse. Rural women have a hard life of physical labour and 85% of Ethiopians live on small rural holdings. Below a very common scene repeated through the country at this time of the year with cattle thrashing crops with their hooves.



In early days Ethiopian monks noticed that roasted coffee berries (which were called the “devils fruit”) helped against nodding off during long midnight prayers. Soon an export market developed and several hundred years later the whole world enjoys a cup of the stuff daily. Most people don't know that Ethiopia is the inventor of coffee and the original and best can be enjoyed at a traditional coffee ceremony. Coffee export from the third world is a huge wealth equaliser with the west and the second single most traded product globally after petroleum.



Building Construction

Addis Ababa is experiencing a big building boom. Economic growth is at an all time high of 14% and enormous skyscrapers are replacing the simple corrugated iron homes. Seeing swarms of manual labourers toil for long days, it is easy to imagine how the pyramids were built. Safety regulations are non existent and workers balance on flimsy bamboo poles on the 20th floor. Women do a lot of the carrying of building materials.



The African Union is building the tallest tower; the motto is “bigger is better”. Chinese businessmen are often at the hub of big projects.



It is nice to see a few words of Gaelic in front of the 5 star Inter Continental Hotel, the embassy is a smaller building at the rear.

History

Ethiopians are very proud of their unique history. It all started about 5000 BC when the queen of Sheba (queen of Ethiopia) decided to visit King Solomon in Jerusalem, to check out his great wisdom and they had a little romance which produced king Menelick 1st. He returned to Ethiopia with the ark of the covenant (the 10 commandment tablets) and founded the great city of Aksum. To this day all Ethiopians are absolutely convinced that the 10 commandments are walled up inside a church in Aksum. The great civilisation at Aksum lasted for almost 800 years thriving on exporting ivory & gold to the Mediterranean cultures in the north.

In about 300 AD King Abraha Atsebha was converted to Christianity by his chief treasurer and the country became Christian. Ethiopian Christianity developed totally independently to the remainder of the world to give what is today known as the Ethiopian Orthodox church. In Europe there were always rumours of a great Christian civilisation far to the south in Africa but this was only fully discovered at the advent of colonialism. This early independent evolution of Christianity is very similar to Irish history with monasteries mixing with local culture.

More recently the country was reunited by Emperor Menelick 2nd who is famous for defeating the invading Italians in 1896 at the famous battle of Adua. Still today, every Ethiopian is hugely proud of this great victory where bravery and simple spears beat the guns of the Italian invaders, who were having a siesta. Ethiopia is one of the few countries in Africa which was never colonised by the west.



Emperor Haile Salassie ruled Ethiopia 1930–1936, and (with a short break in Great Britain due to the 2nd Italo-Abyssinian War) 1941–1974. He visited Europe as a young man and decided to introduce modernity to an isolated tribal culture. He built the first bank, post office and drove a motor car. The first post men wedged their letter in a split bamboo stick and crossed the vast country on foot. The first central bank had a grass roof and Addis Ababa was really a rural town until recent times.



Inequality fuelled a communist revolution in 1974 and the emperor was killed by the Derg regime. The communists lasted until the end of the cold war in 1991 and many today remember the disappearance and death of family and friends at their hands. Last weekend we nearly crashed into a rusted tank at the roadside abandoned in 1991.

A democratic system evolved with rapid progress but in 2006 the ruling party didn't accept electoral defeat and are still in power today, effectively forming a democratic/ dictatorship which is supported by the west. All of Addis is full of imposing government departments with big buildings and important signs. However I guess that one third of the country is run by the UN, another third by NGO's, and one third by national government.

In the beginning...?

You can't have been to Ethiopia without a visit to the anthropological museum. The oldest secrets of our evolution have been discovered in Rift Valley, which is known as the birth place of modern man. Apparently our oldest known ancestor is Lucy a famous skeleton of a woman (in the glass box) looking at her modern counterpart.



Geography

Many eons ago Africa rubbed shoulders with Asia and Ethiopia became the most mountainous country of the continent. The famous Rift Valley travels the length of the country and Addis Ababa lies at 2000m altitude. The country is full of lakes and lush green hill sides. Last weekend we visited Mt. Wenchi volcano with a crater lake. There you cross to a monastic island in traditional log canoes.



The local priest was happy to meet us. Followed by 3 hours on horse back through a ravine.



Most of the water of the great Nile River comes from the Ethiopian mountains. Water is a hot political issue and only last week there was friction between Egypt & Ethiopian because of the construction of a new dam for power generation and irrigation. All the countries down stream feel threatened.

Talking about natural resources, I was struck that a big topic of conversation here is climate change. Everybody is aware of it and feel that the west has developed on the backs of the future food security of poorer countries. The emergency officer of HelpAge is often scrambling to cope with freak droughts or floods in different regions which have become alarmingly frequent.

Little Things

Things are different in Ethiopia. Frequent power cuts (every 2nd day) due to lack of capacity produce a spontaneous candle lit dinner. You are walking down a street with thousands of shoppers and suddenly everything goes black and you only hear voices. Slowly torches and candles flicker, people don't complain and start heading for home. Life is regulated by the sun and people go to bed early and rise early. No long nights only starting after midnight when the real show starts in Dublin/ Berlin (!). In the office when the power cuts, all computers crash, you wait for the guard to start the generator which rattles the window and we can't hear each other speak, but everybody gets used to it.



There is no sewage system in a city of 3 million. Sewage flows into open trenches beside the road in many districts and the rainy season washes everything down the rivers in summer. Last week the word was out that cholera was affecting many schools.

Here there is a great innovation to turn garbage into gold, everything is recycled. Many things are not available so we followed the African example and improvised. In our guesthouse (above) we have made candle sticks from bottles, and developed a storage system for bits and pieces from empty food containers, built shower curtains etc... We have a tiny bathroom, even smaller kitchen and two bedrooms. It is the D4 (Berlin-Mitte) district of Addis but the room rate is acceptable at € 6.50 per night, big money for locals.

Happy and peaceful Christmas to everyone and best wishes for the New Year!!! I wanted to write 4 pages but this has now doubled to 8 because there are so many stories to tell, but perhaps some another time.

Best wishes,

Clemens