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Kenyan farmers seek ways to weather crises

Chris Herlinger | Jan. 20, 2012

Terracing and tree planting on William Ndolo's farm in Kenya (Photos by Chris Herlinger)

NEAR MACHAKOS, KENYA -- At first glance, farmer William Ndolo?s small acreage doesn?t look like much. It doesn?t seem that different from the surrounding dry, desiccated land in this rural pocket southeast of the capital of Nairobi.

The topsoil is parched and dry, for example, and there is a spartan, denudated quality to Ndolo?s farm that, as old-timers will tell you, contrasts with the more variegated and robust land of this region?s past, when you could spot animals (like wild monkeys) roaming the fields.

But if you look more carefully, you will see telling differences between Ndolo?s farm and its surroundings -- differences that are allowing Ndolo and his family to lead, amid a drought, a reasonably sustainable life.

Digging under the topsoil you see that it is actually healthier than it first appears -- richer and darker than the parched top. Then you notice that Ndolo?s fields are terraced, the folds of land shaping downward, allowing rain runoff to serve as irrigation for the crops.

Moreover, the fields of pigeon peas and sweet potatoes are evenly spaced with trees of mango and papaya every 20 feet or so. The trees grow quickly and some bear fruit in the first year, giving the family needed food; moreover, the interplay of trees and different crops enriches the soil.

Not all is normal, of course. ?The only challenge now are the rains,? Ndolo, 54, said as he pointed upward to the clear blue sky on a warm November afternoon. ?We are look up for the rains. Before, the rains were a bit better.?

And when they are better, as they were some years ago, ?this land would be green,? said Japheth Muli, a Catholic Relief Services agricultural specialist. He pointed out that it is difficult to grow corn now amid the drought that worsened in 2011 and is still afflicting the Horn of Africa -- a drought that is straining the food systems of Kenya and Ethiopia and has led to famine in politically unstable Somalia.

Yet the ability of Ndolo to feed his large family -- he is the father of 10 children from two wives and also has six grandchildren -- and still have enough to sell produce in local markets is an example of the benefits of

changes in small-farming practices. Terracing, crop diversification with heartier, more drought-resistant strains like pigeon peas, and improving irrigation systems can help subsistence farmers and perhaps start mitigating against the changes of climate that are putting new pressures on rural areas in the Horn of Africa, say farm experts like Muli.

The fact that Ndolo -- who like other farmers in the area has participated in a food security program by CRS and the Catholic diocese of Machakos -- can even feed his family is no small accomplishment. Those who are still growing only corn are finding it tough-going: Drought is not kind to corn, and those not making changes in their planting are ?not able to buy food in the market,? Ndolo said. ?They are complaining.? Because of the drought, the price of corn doubled in the last half of 2011, though in some markets in Machakos, the price tripled or was even higher.

The changes such as terracing were not that onerous to make, Ndolo said. Yet they did go against certain notions of farming that became popular after Kenya?s 1963 independence from Great Britain. Terracing, once widely practiced during the era of British rule, was abandoned because it was seen as an unwanted colonial holdover. Yet terracing is an effective way of keeping water in the soil, particularly at a time when every drop of moisture counts.

As for the singular devotion to corn, the crop is a centerpiece of Kenyan life, both for eating and for feeding livestock. As Kenyans like to say: ?Corn is in the blood.? But to continue to grow corn alone is courting disaster during these days of drought, Muli said. If more farmers do not adopt changes, Kenyans will be faced with the irritating constants of ?ground that is too hot and losing water through evaporation, and shallow wells that are drying out,? Muli said.

Of course, another factor is good governance -- or the lack of it. There is widespread uneasiness about the current Kenyan government?s commitment to solve long-term problems like climate change. ?Promises are not something to hold onto,? Muli said, noting that in this part of Kenya, authorities are supposed to install running water into every home by 2015.

No one believes that will happen, and there is still lingering, widespread unease about any government promises, particularly given what some say are unresolved problems stemming from Kenya?s political crisis that boiled over into violence in late 2007 and early 2008 and may yet turn ugly again with national elections later this year.

But looking even beyond the immediate issues, there are questions about what is ultimately sustainable in East Africa, where rains are getting scarcer and population numbers (not to mention political conflicts) are increasing.

?There are hazards and vulnerabilities that are stacked up [against the region],? said Alexander van Tulleken, a senior research fellow at Fordham University?s Institute of International Humanitarian Affairs in New York City. With its early-warning systems, Ethiopia has been able to avoid famine this time. ?But the possibility of famine is still prominent in people?s minds,? he said. ?There is still a problem of access to food. This is a region that still lives in fear [of famine].?

Put another way -- the region ?has a vulnerability to shocks,? said Robert Delve, a CRS Kenya-based agriculture and environmental specialist. ?These areas are fragile even in the best of times.? Add conflict (like that in Somalia) and years without much rain, and the ?situation implodes on itself. It?s a disaster.?

?You can cope with one year of bad rain, but not three or four.?

Delve believes that, in the long-term, several changes are needed: locally, building the resilience of communities (like farmer Ndolo?s) so that there is available food; nationally, more government funding and commitment to assist farmers. Other changes: improving infrastructure (including irrigation), and seeing to it that there is less cattle-raising and fewer crises in which military operations and flows of refugees simply wear down land that could be made productive.

?There is enough capacity to feed everybody,? Delve said of the potential of Africa feeding itself, though that is not possible now. He called the Horn of Africa?s current food-producing systems, in particular, ?sub-optimal.?

?The cost of getting food to the places that need it -- that?s the problem,? he said.

But there is another problem, Delve said, and it is an elemental, almost universal tension throughout the world today: the ever-present conflict between farmers, who want a fair price for what they grow, and urban dwellers, who want cheap food.

These tensions -- exacerbated now by the rising price of fuel and increased profits for middlemen (who in Kenya are loathed by both farmers and urban dwellers alike) -- have produced a system subject to crisis after crisis.

?I don?t think we invest in the right things,? Delve said. ?If you don?t invest in the structures that allow farmers to be profitable and just be able to meet their basic livelihoods, well, then you?re going to be like CRS, always responding constantly to these shocks over and over again.?

[Chris Herlinger, a writer for the humanitarian agency Church World Service, is a New York-based freelance journalist. He was recently on assignment in Kenya and Ethiopia for *NCR*. His book *Rubble Nation: Haiti?s Pain, Haiti?s Promise* was just published by Seabury Books.]

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