FARMERS WHO DARE

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:
SKY-HIGH DAIRIES
SOWING BY THE CENTIMETER
RICE, OR MORE RICE?
THIS YEAR, BE PART OF A GLOBAL COMMUNITY.

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ABOVE: Villagers sing after a community meeting in Brocozele, Haiti. Oxfam is working with rice grower cooperatives in this region to help them improve their production and earn more for their crops. Brett Eloff / Oxfam America
DEAR FRIENDS,

In mid-December, Oxfam began distributing 400 metric tons of seeds to Filipino farmers whose fields had been ravaged by the strongest typhoon ever to make landfall. Haiyan wiped out a third of the Philippines’ rice-growing region, a devastating blow to a nation that had hoped to become self-sufficient in rice production.

Small-scale farmers, like those in the Philippines, play a critical role in helping to feed our planet, even as their communities often suffer debilitating poverty. The potential harvest packed into every hectare they till is vast. What’s missing are the public policies and market opportunities that would allow those farmers to flourish.

One of Oxfam’s top goals during the next five years is to help families in rural communities improve their food and income security. In the pages ahead, you’ll read about some of our initiatives in Africa, southeast Asia, and South America—projects that have sparked government engagement and ignited the power of people to help themselves. In the voices of Ethiopia’s Dadie Butaa, Cambodia’s Meas Sopheap, and Peru’s Virginia Nuñonca, you’ll hear the authority that comes with the self-determination and hard-won success of these farmers.

“I don’t feel like being a conformist,” says Nuñonca, who started a dairy operation at 13,000 feet above sea level. “I’m going to fight.”

And she has, by installing a gravity-fed irrigation system that has transformed barren ground into green pasture for her cows. The result is a thriving cheese business producing enough income to fund her children’s education and bolster her family’s diet with fresh vegetables.

One out of every three of us lives in poverty. But we see a future in which no one does. Let us, together, embrace the future—inspired by the drive and daring of farmers like Nuñonca.

Sincerely,

Raymond C. Offenheiser
President, Oxfam America
LOOK. WATCH. LISTEN. JOIN THE CONVERSATION.

LAND GRABS

“Oxfam accused three big international food companies on Tuesday of buying sugar from what the advocacy group described as plantations that had unfairly taken land from farmers in Cambodia and Brazil without proper compensation. ... It contended in a report that sugar, soybeans and palm oil were the three crops producing the fiercest competition for land by large, often foreign, investors. ... The group’s report assailed three companies by name: Coca-Cola, PepsiCo and Associated British Foods. Coca-Cola said that it asked suppliers ‘to recognize and safeguard the rights of communities and traditional peoples to maintain access to land and natural resources.’”


WATCH →

CAMP GREEN

In a post for Humanosphere on Oct. 25, 2013, Tom Paulson describes the visit that Ugandan urban farmer Harriet Nakabaale and her son made to the US, as Oxfam’s guests, to promote support for small-scale farmers. “For Nakabaale and Jumba Squibb, there is nothing so fundamental to personal empowerment as being able to feed yourself,” writes Paulson.

Watch the video that features Nakabaale’s Camp Green: oxfamamerica.org/campgreen.

IN THE NEWS

DEBT CRISIS FOR SYRIAN REFUGEES

From the Christian Science Monitor, Nov. 25, 2013

“A new study from Oxfam estimates that more than 75 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have taken on debt. Some families even rely on remittances from family still in Syria....

“The amount of money they brought ... really speaks to people’s perception of how long they thought they would stay,” says Noah Gottschalk, senior humanitarian policy expert with Oxfam. “It’s starting to sink in that there won’t be a quick solution to the conflict and they’re not able to go home.”

Thousands of Filipinos are dead. More than four million are homeless. And millions have lost the means to support their families. It didn’t have to be this bad."

Raymond C. Offenheiser, president of Oxfam America, writing for MSNBC on Dec. 3, 2013, about the devastation caused by Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the Philippines in early November.
The first shipment of US food aid for Haiyan survivors was scheduled to reach the Philippines in early December—almost one endless month after the strongest typhoon ever to make landfall slammed into the island nation.

For countless Filipinos who lost their homes, their work, and, worst of all, their family members, a month was far too long to wait, and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) knew it. That’s why it decided to give more than 75 percent of the $10 million the US had allocated for food directly—in cash—to the UN’s World Food Programme. Unhampered by layers of law that bog the US down, the UN agency can buy food close to where disaster strikes and get it to survivors faster.

The law governing US food aid is riddled with regulations that favor special interests over saving lives. It bars USAID from procuring food anywhere but the US. On average, it can take the US between four and six months to procure, ship, and distribute food. In an emergency like the one that hit the Philippines, that pace is unacceptable.

The typhoon, with sustained winds up to 195 miles per hour, caused a stunning amount of damage: at least 5,700 people died, more than four million others were displaced, more than one million homes were damaged or destroyed, and the storm wiped out a third of the country’s rice-growing areas. As the full scale of the disaster revealed itself to the world, families faced a frightening reality: Where would they get food, clean water, and shelter to survive the days and weeks ahead?

“What we need now is food, water, medicines for the kids, a new place to stay and things to start over—food, cooking pots, plates,” a worried Rizalina Villegas told a member of an Oxfam rapid assessment team five days after the typhoon hit. “I am still nursing, but I am running out of milk. I do not know where to get milk for our baby.”

After a disaster like Typhoon Haiyan, people have many emergency needs. The Obama administration has called on Congress to overhaul the aid system, and each catastrophe reminds us of the dire need for food, humanitarian, and development aid reform.

What can you do to ensure that future disaster survivors won’t have to wait for weeks or months for the food they need to reach them? Help Oxfam bring common-sense reform to a decades-old system. It’s time to stop wasting vast sums and precious time in shipping costs with every disaster. Visit oxfamamerica.org/haiyanfoodaid.

ABOVE: Residents in Samar province walk past the wreckage left by Typhoon Haiyan. Jire Carreon / Oxfam
Meas Sopheap has always been a leader. As the oldest of eight children, she was born to the role. But it was not until she learned some innovative rice-growing practices called the System of Rice Intensification (SRI)—and became a trainer of other farmers—that the rest of the village began to notice her capabilities. Now she is the deputy chief of her village, Krang Lahong. It’s an unusual role for a woman in rural Cambodia.

“Before, I would never stand in front of a group of people and talk,” she says. “Now I teach people. I know how to talk to people, even though I am sure I am not perfect at it. This is new for me … but my teaching comes from my personal experience growing rice.”

Sopheap is part of a new generation of small-scale rice growers who are embracing innovative approaches like SRI that encourage learning, information sharing, and collaboration. Oxfam’s partners in Cambodia, Vietnam, and Haiti are bringing together growers in groups called “farmer field schools” to learn SRI techniques and to encourage experimentation and innovation. Farmers who used to be subsistence-level producers learn to try new ideas, like transplanting younger rice seedlings (less labor intensive) and spacing them farther apart in neat rows. This practice encourages stronger roots, bigger plants, and more grains even though the farmers actually spend less on seeds and grow fewer plants. The

CHRIS HUFSTADER REPORTS ON A NEW GENERATION OF SMALL-SCALE GROWERS WHO SHARE THE SEEDS OF INNOVATION.
In Vietnam, Oxfam has been helping fund farmer training in SRI by the Agriculture Ministry. Each farmer field school designates “key farmers,” who get more specialized training and serve as expert consultants for their local group. The ministry also connects key farmers to the more mainstream growers in the Vietnam Farmer’s Union, the country’s largest and most influential farmer organization.

“We want the key farmer network to build links to the Farmer’s Union as a means to help these SRI farmers advocate for more and better support from the government for SRI farmers,” explains Linh Pham, program officer for Oxfam in Vietnam. In the five years that Oxfam has been working with the government of Vietnam, more than a million farmers have adopted SRI practices, and the government has increased its financial support for SRI farmers from less than $75,000 in 2009 to more than $500,000 in 2012.

Although Cambodia is not investing in SRI the way the government of Vietnam has, the country’s SRI rice farmers grew an extra 100,000 tons of rice in 2012, which added around $30 million to local economies.

EXCITEMENT IN EXPERIMENTATION

For Sopheap, becoming a trainer of local rice farmers and then a community leader seems like a natural role. She is a woman of action. When she was about 14, she dropped out of school to work on the communal farm so that her family could get a larger share of food to feed her siblings. After her parents passed away, she paid all the education expenses for her brothers and sisters, and gave them land and cattle to start their own farms.

Sopheap says all the farmers in Krang Lahong now use SRI practices, but they sell their rice right off the paddy to middlemen. “I want to lead the village to establish a rice processing and exporting business here,” she says, to help farmers capture more of the value of their crop.

Just outside the village, a short walk from her home across a small bridge over the irrigation channel, Sopheap is checking rice plants in a small paddy where she and other growers in her village are testing 28 different varieties, each in a one-square-meter area.

“I’m interested in this one,” she says, pointing to one variety, labeled T-Isay. “There are more grains in each panicle,” she says, holding out the grain-bearing part of the plant.

“I like to do experiments like this, to see the different varieties from the Philippines, Myanmar, and other places,” she says. “I’d like to know which of them will grow well year-round, and which withstand pests and diseases better.”

Sopheap says any of the varieties should work well using the System of Rice Intensification. Once the other farmers see which one is working best, they will try it with the techniques they are using to grow more rice.
HIGH-ALTITUDE OPTIMISM

AT 13,000 FEET ABOVE SEA LEVEL, ONE FARMER IN PERU PROVES IT’S POSSIBLE TO CONFRONT CLIMATE CHANGE—AND THRIVE. NOW, THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT IS FOLLOWING IN HER FOOTSTEPS. ANNA KRAMER REPORTS.
On a windswept hill outside of Tahuapalka, Peru, Virginia Ñuñonca and her daughter, Soledad, are cooking potatoes underground. Using a traditional method called *huatia*, they buried dozens of tiny gray-brown potatoes in the stony soil and roasted them for hours with hot coals. As her visitors watch, Soledad uses a wooden pole to adjust the nearly done tubers, releasing a tendril of smoke into the chilly mountain air.

Baked, boiled, mashed, fried, even freeze-dried: you’ll find every possible preparation of potatoes in Espinar, a rural region where tiny villages like Tahuapalka dot the wide, mostly empty Andean plateau. The hardy tubers are one of the few crops that thrive here at 13,000 feet above sea level.

But potatoes, while filling, aren’t enough to keep a family healthy and fed. And in Espinar, as in much of the Peruvian highlands, hunger and malnutrition are a constant threat. That’s why Oxfam worked with local farmers to address some of the problems—changes in the climate, limited economic opportunities—that keep people from accessing the food they need. Thanks to the remarkable efforts of the farmers themselves, as well as the local government’s willingness to invest in similar initiatives, many of these solutions have proven truly sustainable.

**WHEN MILK IS A BLESSING**

“I have always been an optimist,” said Ñuñonca, 54, as she and her daughter sat down to lunch with their guests. Along with potatoes, still warm from the earth, they served a dense, sharp-flavored white cheese called *paria*.

Ñuñonca makes the cheese herself, from her own cows, in a small dairy she built on her farm. Each cheese sells for 12 soles, or $4, in the nearby market of Espinar, generating about $50 in income each week. She uses the money to fund her children’s education and to buy vegetables to supplement the family diet.

With a thriving family of six children (two of whom still live at home) and three grandchildren, plus a successful small business, Ñuñonca has reason to be optimistic. But in the past, she said, it was harder to maintain her positive outlook.

“Before, when I only raised sheep and alpacas, my living was in a sad state,” she said. “Every six months, I’d sell a sheep and buy some rice or other food. That’s the only time each year that I had any income. ... Because I had children, I couldn’t go out [to another city] and work.”

Things began to change for Ñuñonca in 2010, when her community selected her to participate in an Oxfam America-funded project called *Q’emikuspa*—named for a word that means “working together” in the Quechua language. With Oxfam’s support, two local partner organizations helped rural indigenous people in Espinar become more resilient in the face of drought, extreme cold, and other life-threatening consequences of climate change.

That sometimes meant bringing new technology to these isolated rural communities, such as reservoirs to conserve water; gravity-powered sprinklers to irrigate fields; and hardier, cold-resistant grasses to nourish animals during the dry season.

Oxfam America program officer Lorena Del Carpio emphasized that the farmers who joined *Q’emikuspa* weren’t just passive recipients. All took part in trainings from Oxfam’s partners to learn how to operate and maintain the equipment on their own, and some even took this knowledge one step further.

“As the technology yielded results, families would see its value,” said Del Carpio. “They started expanding their irrigation systems, which allowed them to irrigate more land and purchase more livestock.”
Ñuñonca was one of those who took the initiative. “The reservoir, and the training I received [from Oxfam’s local partner organization] were motivation for me; I felt encouraged,” she said. “Sometimes people here complain: ‘There’s no water, we can’t do anything, we can’t feed our animals.’ But I don’t feel like being a conformist. I said, ‘I’m going to fight. I’m going to expand my pasture.’”

After Oxfam’s partner helped Ñuñonca build a reservoir—a square, plastic-lined pool fed by an underground spring, holding 26,000 gallons of water—she dug additional irrigation canals, purchasing and laying underground pipes herself.

Today, Ñuñonca’s fields stand out against the dry hills: bright green squares on an endless quilt of brown and tan. Since 2010, she has increased her irrigated pasture-land threefold—from two acres to six—and planted clover, which normally doesn’t flourish in the dry climate of Espinar.

“Thanks to the project, I was able to purchase these dairy cows [which graze on the clover],” said Ñuñonca. “I can sell their milk and cheese … and make natural yogurt to feed my children. The milk is sacred. It’s a blessing.”

AN INVESTMENT POWERED BY FARMERS
Ñuñonca and others like her were at the forefront of the Q’emikuspa project, which concluded in mid-2013. Their reservoirs, pastures, and irrigation systems were prototypes, meant to demonstrate the positive impacts of addressing climate change locally and investing in Espinar’s rural people.

And, as Del Carpio explained, these farmers’ successes helped pave the way for local government investment in similar initiatives. “[When we designed Q’emikuspa], we asked, ‘Why are local authorities not prioritizing this kind of project?’” said Del Carpio. “Our partners trained people in workshops to learn community planning, to make project proposals prioritizing climate issues, and to [join the district level] participatory budget process. If they can go to those spaces and say, ‘We want this,’ it can help them get the funds they need.” The project also worked directly with governments to shape policies that would benefit local communities.

As a result, Coporaque (one of two districts where the project worked, within the larger region of Espinar) set aside funding in its budget to build 900 reservoirs in seven communities. The district began building reservoirs in 2012, and is constructing irrigation canals to ensure a secure water supply. When completed, this project will benefit thousands of families.

It’s an outcome that Ñuñonca herself would be proud of. “I don’t want to be the only one with this reservoir,” she said. “I want all of my neighbors to get milk, to live, and to make progress.”

SURVIVING A CLIMATE EMERGENCY
In August 2013, Peru declared a state of emergency in 10 regions, including Cusco, where Espinar is located. Temperatures in the Andes had dropped to their lowest levels in decades. Throughout highland Peru, about 100,000 rural people were affected by the cold and accompanying snowfall, and tens of thousands of animals died. Children and elderly people also suffered illnesses, like pneumonia, from living in unheated houses.

“The people at these high altitudes say that year after year … the climate is more extreme and unpredictable,” Frank Boeren, country director of Oxfam in Peru, told the UK Guardian in September. “Meanwhile, [the declaration of emergency] is being repeated year after year.”

But in Espinar, farmers who participated in the Q’emikuspa project were better-
As of this writing, Peru’s Congress is debating a potentially groundbreaking piece of legislation: the country’s first-ever national food security law. Giovanna Vasquez, manager of Oxfam’s Apoya y Crece campaign against hunger in Peru, said that Oxfam has been working for the law’s passage since it was introduced in early 2013—designated by the government as the year of investment in rural development and food security. “What we want is for public investment in small producers to increase, because they play an important role in putting food on tables in Peru,” said Vasquez.

Though Peruvian crops like quinoa are in high demand both locally and globally, not all families in Peru can easily access food. In 2012, the Ministry of Development and Social Inclusion found that 13 million citizens—more than a third of the population—are at risk of food insecurity. Nearly 30 percent of rural children under 5 are malnourished.

These problems reflect a longtime underinvestment in the country’s rural areas, where poverty and hunger rates are much higher. “Look around, and you see two Perus,” wrote journalist Marie Arana in a New York Times op-ed in March 2013. “Effervescent Lima, nine and a half million strong, and the 20 million more who live outside it.”

In one remote village, where cellphones and the internet are still not reliably available, trained locals used solar-powered radios—installed by O’emikuspa as part of an emergency response system—to call for urgently needed supplies like animal feed and medicines. “If not for the radios, they would have had to travel to the district center [to get help], which would take much longer,” said Huaylla.

Huaylla said that, as a result of the project, local governments have set up their own trainings on climate change adaptation and emergency preparedness. It’s a well-timed focus, as climate-related emergencies continue to affect Espinar, while Peru’s central government has a history of underinvesting in the country’s poorest, most rural areas.

Connecting the two sometimes means using creative tactics, like Oxfam’s interactive art exhibit at the popular Mistura Food Festival in Lima last September. More than 4,000 festivalgoers colored in 11 murals on “the art of food” and pledged their support for the country’s small-scale farmers. Among them was Peruvian President Ollanta Humala.

“Those living in the city are not necessarily conscious of the problem [of food insecurity], nor do they recognize the role of small producers and women in the food they consume,” said Vasquez. “We have to make a great effort for [them] to become aware of the issue.”

On Oct. 16, 2013—World Food Day—Oxfam helped some of its allies organize a public demonstration in Lima. Shoppers and businesspeople stopped to watch as hundreds of indigenous women, most wearing traditional clothes made from tiny mirrors and bright woven fabrics, marched through the city’s traffic-choked downtown. They carried signs with messages like “Climate change is affecting our harvests and food for our children,” and “We don’t want charity. We want more opportunities.”

“Yesterday, we were in Congress,” said Lucy Salas Grandes, a coffee farmer from Rioja who serves as acting secretary of the indigenous women’s group that co-organized the march. “We’re hoping the leaders hear us. … We want them to realize that women from the fields are important.”

But Oxfam is working to help change that, too. This high-altitude project was just one of several initiatives to tackle hunger and increase investment in small-scale farmers throughout Peru (see story below).

“A CLOSER LOOK
See more photos and stories from the O’emikuspa project in Peru at oxfamamerica.org/irrigation.
THE 25-CENTIMETER RULE

HOW DADIE BUTAA TURNED A HECTARE OF HUNGER INTO FIELDS OF BOUNTY: COCO MCCABE REPORTS ON A NEW DIRECTION FOR ETHIOPIA’S AGRICULTURE EXTENSION SYSTEM.

When Dadie Butaa first learned what his single hectare of land in the Ethiopian village of Karsa Ilala could produce if he followed the steps recommended by his local farmer training center, he couldn’t believe it.

“They are crazy,” he recalls thinking. “It’s a lie.”

But Butaa, a highly energetic man of 38, was intrigued. The father of four children, Butaa remembered his own childhood well—a childhood he did not want to see repeated.

“I was hungry a lot,” says Butaa, whose mother died when he was 9. “I faced a lot of difficulties.”

So—with the memory of those hard times always fresh—Butaa decided to give the new practices he had heard about a try. He would plant in rows, weed carefully, and compost wastes for a cheap source of fertilizer. The result? Harvests that are far more bountiful than any the land had produced before.

“With the memory of those hard times always fresh—Butaa decided to give the new practices he had heard about a try. He would plant in rows, weed carefully, and compost wastes for a cheap source of fertilizer. The result? Harvests that are far more bountiful than any the land had produced before.

“In earlier times of our fathers’ fathers, there is no technology. No one shows us any practices,” says Butaa. “The yield was not enough for food, for clothes.” Now, from half his land, or just over an acre, he is able to reap 21 quintals of corn—about six times what his ancestors coaxed from the same soil. And it’s all thanks to knowledge gleaned from Karsa Ilala’s newly outfitted farmer training center.

“I feel very happy,” says Butaa. “It’s the place where I changed my life.”

That transformation is the goal behind a sweeping initiative to strengthen Ethiopia’s agriculture extension system, a country-wide network of educators staffing more than 18,000 training centers. The system was designed to promote good agricultural practices that ensure greater food security for the nation and more robust livelihoods for farmers, but rapid staff turnover in rural areas and limited funding for the facilities have undermined the system’s effectiveness over the years.

Now, an unusual coalition of partners—Oxfam America, the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture, and the Sasakawa Africa Association—have joined forces to carry out a multimillion-dollar project to inject new life into the way communities learn about better farming practices. At the heart of the project is the empowerment of farmers—including women—to become active leaders of and participants in their local agricultural training centers. Oxfam is fully equipping 215 of the centers in 10 regions while building the skills and knowledge of the 645 experts—known as development agents, or DAs—who staff
The facilities. The goal of Oxfam’s $5.3 million investment in the initiative, along with the support of the government and Sasakawa’s focus on new technologies such as seeds and advanced farming methods, is to trigger change across the entire agriculture extension system.

PARTNERING WITH THE GOVERNMENT

“Ethiopia has an immense potential to increase production and productivity of crops and livestock,” says Chimdo Anchala, the project coordinator for Oxfam America. “But the problem is limited capacity, and limited infrastructure and facility. This project will improve the service delivery of the Ethiopian agricultural extension system and help farmers become self-supporting.”

Essential to realizing that potential—and making sure that systemic change happens—is the government.

“At the end of the day, the government is the only entity that can ensure the sustainability of this initiative. That’s why it is an important partner,” says Anchala. “The Ministry of Agriculture has been involved from the very beginning—from the design phase onward. They are playing a key role. When you work with the government, you have an opportunity to share ideas and perspectives and help shape its thinking—to show what works well and what doesn’t.”

For farmers like Butaa, one thing that is working well is the extension system’s new focus on hands-on training for DAs—a practical approach, as opposed to the former theoretical one—that they can pass directly on to farmers.

“We are learning and learning from farmer training centers,” says Butaa, who listens carefully to what the development agents tell him and then tests for himself to see which new seeds and methods work best.

Striding along the edge of one of his fields, thick with wheat, he comes to a sudden stop, parts the stalks, and reveals the neat rows—exactly 25 centimeters apart—that helped make this field so lush. The rows allow him to weed easily and fertilize each plant directly.

“I get a lot of advantage from this,” he says. “The work is very hard, but at the end the result is good.”

And that’s exactly what the project is aiming to prove: that with a few modifications to their methods, farmers who grow crops and raise livestock can make significant improvements in their yields.

LEARNING BY DOING

“It’s all about getting the right information at the right time to the right audience,” says Anchala. Key to that are crop demonstration plots, livestock and poultry sheds, and the beehives that are now integral to the training centers Oxfam and Sasakawa have invested in—all designed to give farmers practical exposure to new ways of doing things. And as important is the participation of communities in helping to develop the centers and design methodological approaches that suit farmers’ needs.

HE COMES TO A SUDDEN STOP, PARTS THE STALKS, AND REVEALS THE NEAT ROWS—EXACTLY 25 CENTIMETERS APART—THAT HELPED MAKE THIS FIELD SO LUSH.

In the community of Gubeta Arjo, in Arsi Negele, a newly installed fence marks the boundary of a three-hectare training center. Inside the gate, plots of corn labeled with small signs remind farmers of the varieties growing there: Abarya, BH540, BH543. Through the course of the growing season, they can watch the progress of the varieties and note the effects of rain and fertilizer on each.

“Finally, at the end of the year, the farmers pick the best ones,” said Gerishu Bati, who works for the Dorgia region’s bureau of agriculture and is helping to coordinate this project. That’s the variety they will plant in their own fields.
Beyond the corn, vegetables march in neat rows, tended by the careful hand of Kadir Hussein. Cabbages, lettuce, kale, and carrots are among the produce he has learned to cultivate—a skill Hussein did not have before. Cabbage, he says, is his new favorite vegetable: not only is it good to eat, it’s a good cash crop as well.

Meanwhile, all the vegetables Hussein is learning to nurture here will be sold at market and the income used to support the ongoing work of the training center. That’s one of the objectives of the Oxfam initiative—to make the training centers self-supporting, and therefore sustainable.

In the village of Wahil, in Dire Dawa region, Momina Abdurahman admires the five sheep and one goat, munching on leafy branches, now corralled in the shade of a tree next to her house. Abdurahman has raised plenty of animals: she used to let them wander and graze wherever was convenient—and often with one of her children sent to mind them.

But now, with guidance from the local training center, Abdurahman is practicing “zero grazing”: she keeps her small herd close to her house where they easily can be fed and sheltered. The method not only improves the health and value of her livestock, it frees Abdurahman’s children to go to school.

Already, she has managed to save 2,000 birr (almost $105) on the sale of other animals cared for in the same way, and she is now pouring her earnings into school fees for her children. It’s an investment that’s worth every hard-earned penny: recently, her daughter, Ayantu Mussa, won the top academic prize for seventh-graders in her community school.

With all the success she is having with her animals, Abdurahman may well be on her way to proving a motto posted on a sign at one of the training centers: “There won’t be any house that doesn’t get rich and any land that won’t produce.”

HELPING TO CHANGE PEOPLE’S LIVES

It’s one thing for a community to have a fully equipped training center, but without well-trained and knowledgeable people to staff it, farmers won’t get much out of the facility. That’s why a key part of Oxfam’s initiative to strengthen Ethiopia’s agriculture extension system is focusing on development agents (DAs)—the farming experts assigned to each center.

Equipped with college diplomas, DAs are receiving extra training in communication and facilitation skills as well as in how to teach to adults. Oxfam and its partners are also pushing to increase the annual salaries of the DAs to bring them in line with what rural health agents are paid.

For Dejene Bogale, a 25-year-old development agent in Debre Libanos in the North Shewa zone, there is nothing he wanted more as a child than to learn how to be a farmer like his father. Now, with an expertise in plant science, he is helping others, including his father, become better farmers themselves.

Bogale’s days start early, often by 6 a.m., and much of his time he spends in the fields helping farmers to understand and adopt some of the new ideas he is promoting.

“In most cases, the difficult thing is to change the attitude of individuals,” says Bogale. “Farmers are suspicious to try new technologies.” They want to wait and see if the new approach is going to work at the training centers before they take the plunge.

Despite that bit of resistance, Bogale says he has been able to persuade about a third of the local farmers in his area to try a new method of planting that has greatly increased their yields. The secret? Farmers are now sowing their seeds in rows instead of broadcasting them, in some cases nearly doubling the size of their teff harvests.

Why aren’t all farmers embracing this improved planting method?

“It takes time for them to adapt,” says Bogale simply and with the wisdom of someone who has grown up in the region and understands his community deeply. With that same measure of patience, he has also been promoting the idea of cooperative irrigation, bringing together farmers who have land with others who have pumps. When the crops are ready, they split the yield. The system has allowed farmers who could harvest only once a year to now plant two or three times a year.

That outcome not only delights Bogale, it’s what motivates him.

“T’m happy to be a DA because I’m changing people’s lives,” he says.
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