

A Dam Connects Machakos, Kenya, To Archbold, Ohio

As Development Aid In
Rural Africa Dwindles,
American Farmers Pitch In

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MACHAKOS, Kenya -- Water is so precious around here that when a modest dam was built last September to catch the seasonal flow of the Ikiwe River, the local farmers christened it Mercy of God.

But when the dam's earthly benefactors arrived four months later, as the first irrigated fields began to yield peppers and tomatoes, Pastor Cosmas Mwanzia of the Redeemed Gospel Church suggested a new name: Mercy of Archbold.

Archbold, Ohio, that is.

Residents of that small village and neighboring hamlets on the plains west of Toledo provided the money to construct the crude cement-and-stone dam, which is about 100 feet wide and 10 feet deep. Over the past four years, they have sold cattle and hosted an annual hamburger festival to raise more than \$70,000. That money has helped build several hundred small-scale dams and water retention ponds in the Machakos area, delivering 5,000 families from drought and hunger.

"Before when it rained, the water would run away. But not anymore," said Susan Kanini, a peasant farmer triumphantly waving a freshly picked pepper from her plot beside the Ikiwe. She presented the pepper to Jim Rufenacht, an Archbold cattle farmer who had journeyed here to south-central Kenya to see what the donations had wrought. "Thank you for all you have done," she said.

"Oh, it's nothing special," replied Mr. Rufenacht. "We're just farmers like you."

They are farmers tilling a field largely neglected by the big international aid agencies: the economic development of small farming communities in Africa. While international aid for education and health projects and emergency food relief has grown over the past two decades, aid for agriculture and rural development has shrunk by more than half, contributing to increasing malnutrition and hunger.

The project in Archbold, population 4,500, is part of Foods Resource Bank, a Michigan-based hunger-fighting organization that connects urban churches with rural farm groups. The churches help finance the growing of crops or cattle dedicated to particular rural development projects, most of them in Africa. Rather than send the food as aid, it is sold on U.S. markets and the profit is then dispatched abroad, where the recipient farmers decide how best to use the money to boost their own production. In the past seven years, agricultural projects in 19 states raised \$7 million. That amount has been matched by \$3 million from the public-private partnership initiative of the U.S. Agency for International Development.

The Mercy of God dam stands as a monument to the big impact of little projects. With \$3,000 from Archbold, the local farmers hired an engineer to design the dam and bought the cement. The farmers themselves supplied sand, boulders and labor. Within 25 days, they completed a dam that keeps the Ikiwe flowing for many months past the rainy season. Twenty-five acres that once were parched bush land now teem with tomatoes, peppers, chilis and watermelon.

Before the water projects, local residents, mainly the women and children, would trudge as far as 10 miles to collect water for their crops, their cattle and themselves. During repeated droughts at the end of the 1990s, Mr. Mwanzia would stand at the pulpit of his Pentecostal church on Sunday mornings and wait for the pews to fill. He often didn't commence preaching until noon. "The people spent the cooler morning hours getting water," he says.



The Mercy of God dam on the Ikiwe River in Kenya's Machakos region.

Once they were in the pews, his congregants frequently challenged the message of his sermons. "I was preaching, 'One day we'll all be in heaven. There will be no shortage of water, no famine,' " he recalls. "And the people would ask: 'But pastor, what are we supposed to do before we get there?' "

Mr. Mwanzia contacted international relief agencies to provide food aid. "But I knew we couldn't continue with that because we would always be dependent on others," he says. So he formed the Machakos Rural Development

Program. The members drew up a list of priorities -- water was at the top -- and distributed it to various aid organizations, including Foods Resource Bank.

In Archbold, the Mennonite Church was considering starting up a growing project for the Foods Resource Bank, which is supported by a number of denominations. As farmers themselves, Mr. Rufenacht and his brother, Corwin, immediately sympathized with the need for water in Machakos. "If we had to walk that far for water, we wouldn't get anything else done," says Corwin.

They decided they would add several dozen calves -- last year it was 50 -- to their usual cattle business and raise them for Foods Resource. They enlisted other churches to help with the care and feeding. Donations came in from Lutherans, Catholics and others. Together, the congregations staged an annual "burger bash," which last year raised more than \$7,000.

In Machakos, where rain is usually concentrated in two brief periods during the year, the farmers welcomed the shower of money as if it were rain itself. The farmers purchased tools and material to create basins that would become ponds as they fill up with the seasonal rain. They dug trenches to funnel the rainwater from the dirt roads to the fields. They built dams so the rivers that appear with the rain don't disappear so quickly.

With water sources now nearby for most of the year, the farmers no longer have to walk so far to fetch water, which gives them time to work on their second priority: better roads.

The Machakos region is a treacherous web of badly rutted dirt paths, which keep many farmers from taking their surplus production to the markets. With their new free time, the farmers regularly gather to fill the ruts and smooth over bumps. As a result, a bike ride between two market villages that once took more than two hours now takes 30 minutes. And the price of renting bike transport over that route has fallen to \$3 from \$6.

Peter Mutiso pedals down one of the improved roads carrying a pump and generator on the back of his bike. He is on his way home to install a new irrigation system. Before he dug his own water-retention pond, he made less than \$100 a year from farming. Last year, with a manual irrigation system, he earned \$500 selling surplus vegetables at the market. He used some of that money to buy the generator and mechanical pump, which he says will help him double the size of his cultivated land to four acres. He has also planted 400 mango trees.

"Progress!" proclaimed Jim Rufenacht. Later, choking back tears, he told community leaders gathered under an acacia tree, "We had no idea what you're doing here. It's super."

Pastor Mwanzia beamed. He wore his own symbol of progress: a blue and yellow tie clashing gloriously with a red-and-black checkered shirt. The improved incomes of the farmers, he explained, have led to improved yields in the Sunday morning collection plates. "Before the water," he says, "I couldn't afford a tie."

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