

The charity and Development Education

The origins of Excellent Development can be traced back to 1984 when its founder, Simon Maddrell, met Kenyan farmer Joshua Mukusya. At that time, Joshua had already had many years' experience of dam-building, and organising self-help, educational, health and agricultural projects in his native eastern Kenya. By 2002 the work of this partnership was formalised into the registered charity Excellent Development and in 2006 Excellent Development Kenya was registered as an NGO. Excellent Development Kenya is entirely staffed by local people with Excellent Development UK acting as its support structure, primarily as a source of funding.

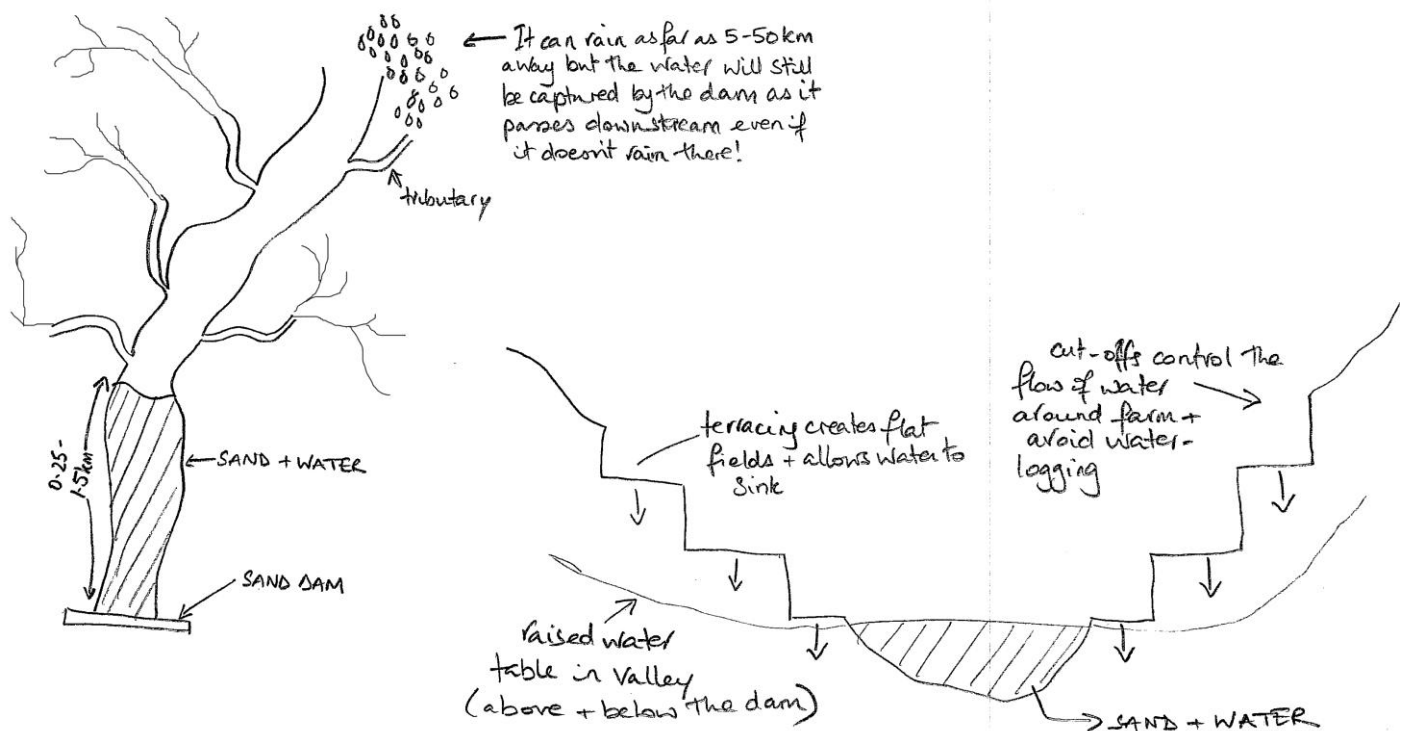
The charity has grown incredibly fast, fuelled by the number of communities who, seeing the difference soil and water conservation and other techniques have made to their neighbouring communities, are prepared to put in the work to achieve it for themselves and have approached Excellent Development to support their work.

Excellent's Development is a different kind of development. Its success is based on people working together and sharing knowledge. The charity's role is as minimal as possible in order to allow communities to take control of their own destiny. We believe we are an excellent! example of small scale appropriate development that 'doesn't cost the earth' and really makes a difference, and we hope that our story will stimulate and challenge the next generation's way of thinking about development.

Soil and water conservation:

Terracing

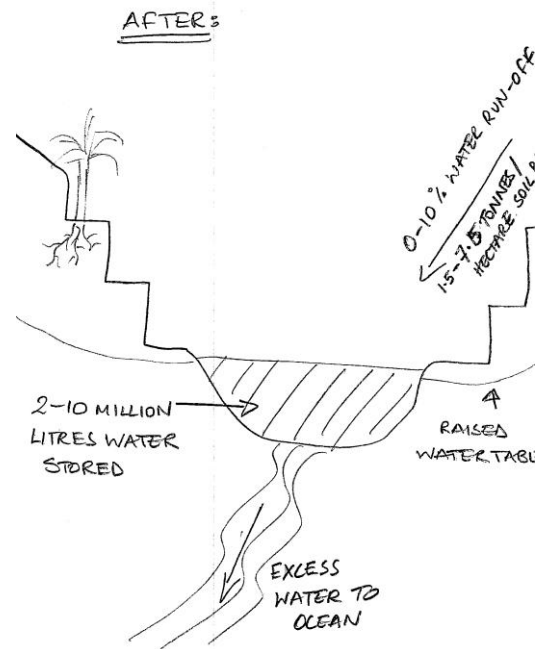
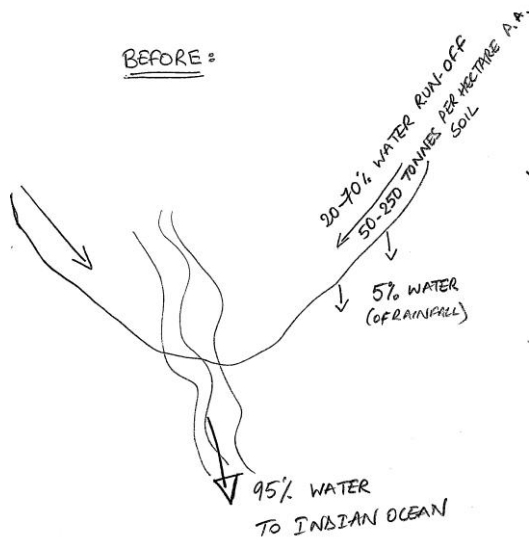
Terraces are designed to not only create flat fields that allow more water to be retained in the farms but also to control the flow of water around the farm which can stop newly planted seeds being washed away during high rainfall, and reduce soil erosion and flooding. If the terraces are designed carefully with additional trenches and cut-offs, farmers can control the water to ensuring appropriate overflows and even distribution around the farm.



Sand dams

Dams get a very bad press and in many cases this is well deserved but here's our response to the questions we usually get grilled on! Sand dams do not create a honey pot for one community at the expense of another. The water stored in the dams is mostly rainwater. Rain from as far away as 5-50km in that valley or a tributary valley flows downriver and is trapped behind the dam. It is therefore additional water and given the huge volume of water there is during the rainy season, communities downstream are not affected. The water that is stored would normally have ended up in the Indian Ocean. In fact there is a beneficial ripple effect as far out as 20km in periods of drought as the pressure on other water sources is lessened.

Problems of evaporation, water borne disease and parasites are minimised as well since the water is stored within the sand, and the water, filtered by the sand, is much cleaner than other traditional water sources.



Trees

Trees do use a lot of water but they also help retain a lot more in the soil and the net effect is one of more water retained. Excellent Development encourage the planting of native, endangered and medicinal species many of which provide several benefits.

Area and culture

We work with the Kamba people of the Machakos and Makueni Districts of south-eastern Kenya. A combination of our previous experience in the region and the disadvantaged nature of the environment led us to choose this area for our activities.

The southeast region of Kenya is semi-arid and suffers from poor soil fertility and rainfall, making it a marginal agricultural area prone to food shortages. A January 2001 summary by the Red Cross emphasised the disadvantaged nature of this region:

"The present drought in Kenya, which began in 1999, has been the worst in the last 60 years, placing Kenya second only to Ethiopia on the list of worst affected countries in the region. Three successive seasons of poor rainfall in parts of Kenya have resulted in between 2 and 3 million people being at risk of starvation after 20 million cattle died and 70% or more of their crops were lost.

"Small-scale subsistence farmers who depend on rain for their main livelihoods of agriculture and livestock have been reduced to a state of destitution. The Kamba people in Kenya's Machakos District had nothing to eat and nothing left to plant."

Our tree-planting and dam-building programmes conserve and improve the local environment and provide protection against the impacts of droughts, as well as providing additional food, fuel and income capability.

Joshua Mukusya, our project consultant in Kenya, explains: "What we have done over the years is worked in places where most experts and agencies won't go - because the roads aren't there. This is where the real need is, places like Mbukuni where we are working. Mbukuni is a place that isn't easy to get to, or get results quickly, so no one wants to work there. The difference is that Excellent Development is prepared and happy to work in these places."

Community Development Philosophy

A vital principle of Excellent's work is that communities decide on their own goals, and contribute to their project's implementation and sustainability. Every project starts with people organising themselves into self-help community groups, focussing on their own needs and priorities. Excellent Development neither imposes solutions nor takes a specific solution-based approach to its work. It is Excellent who adapt and re-prioritise according to what they hear - rather than the other way around.

Excellent Development builds dams only where communities want them - demonstrated by their willingness to collect all

the water, sand and stones required for construction. This amounts to 50% of the total building costs. Because community groups build the dams themselves, they not only make sure they are built right but they also have ownership and are committed to the benefits they bring. By terracing land around the dam, they improve its effectiveness; by owning them they ensure the low maintenance required is carried out when needed.

Joshua Mukusya, our Kenya Programme Manager says: "Since we started working together in 1985, we do what the people want rather than what we feel is necessary. We don't go to groups with set goals; we hear what they want and understand their thinking so that we can help them move towards their goals."

Communities doing the work together

Another essential principle of our approach is to mobilise communities to work together, to achieve more than they could on their own. This principle is rooted in local traditions:

"Joshua's whole philosophy is based on the traditional Kikamba work ethic, whereby people work together and then move on as a group to help other groups to work in the same way. I don't know of any other group in Kenya that works this way" Harold F Miller, Mennonite Central Committee, Nairobi.

Giving for Free

Our way of working focuses on giving people the support they need to solve their own problems, so they retain ownership of their lives and create self-respect and dignity rather than diminishing it. That is why we do not give people things for free. As Rhoda Silu of the Utooni project told us: "If you give someone something for free then all you are doing is showing him that he is already dead."

Sometimes it is hard to say 'no', especially to the little things, but no one said this was going to be easy!

How our Development Works

Simon Maddrell, our Executive Officer says: "If we look at what Excellent Development does and how the development works, 70% is helping people do what they already know. 25% is encouraging people to remember what they have forgotten - or sadly had beaten out of them by government extension workers - traditional techniques like intercropping - 5% is stuff from outside. New ideas brought by myself and Joshua. Little seeds planted on the ground, some of which grow, some of which don't. We don't care which one grows and which one doesn't - the ones that grow are the ones that people want to grow."

Women's Empowerment & children

Around 80% of the project participants are women, and women also form about half the committee members. As the project progresses, their focus shifts from survival to determining their own future, and taking part in local decision-making. Rhoda Mutio Silu of the Utooni Project says "When we join 2-3 of us we share ideas, we grow our minds and gain experience from one another".

The projects strengthen the communities in other ways too. Maybe the most important is that children now have a much better chance of going to school regularly. They often used to spend hours a day fetching water, or looking after younger children while their mothers went for water.

Once their lives have stabilised, communities branch out in different directions. Some have set up group savings plans. One well-established group has built accommodation to rent to teachers or traders, and a centre to teach clothes-making.

Community Exchanges

Building on the principle of encouraging communities to help each other, we also encourage groups to learn from each other and share ideas, by organising workshops and exchange trips. Such meetings provide motivation and encouragement, as well as a focus for involving different members of the community and increasing the chance that the groups and their work will be sustained in the long-term.

Simon Maddrell comments: "One of the strengths of Excellent Development is that we don't work with communities in isolation. We listen and act upon that, so actually the people themselves are the biggest power and enabler of development. Communities will all come together and discuss their problems. They see that one group is further ahead than the other and that gives them motivation. They see an idea or solution working, like intercropping, Napier grass and the planting of trees and it's their own people telling them how they've done it and how they've moved forward. The power isn't coming from the outside and giving solutions, the power is in helping people to help each other."

Sustainability - Youth Migration

One key challenge for Excellent's work is helping groups to become sustainable by reducing youth migration. In order to address this, the younger generation need to be shown that people can still have a successful life, even in the rural areas.

Excellent is encouraging football and netball teams for the young people connected to the project, as an extension of the community exchange programme. In exchange for shirts they help their parents to build dams and terracing. They also visit other projects to play and work.