

## Food

Kenya is a mix of fertile land with good rains and marginal land in semi-arid areas. Because it supplies tea, coffee, vegetables and flowers to the West, many of us simply don't realise how badly parts of Kenya are affected by drought. In 1999, 2-3 million people in Kenya were at risk of starvation, after 20 million of their cattle died and at least 70% of their crops were lost. In 2006 the United Nations said a "catastrophic" number of people throughout the Horn of Africa were at risk of starvation. 3.5 million of the 10 million people at risk were from Kenya.

After water, food production is the biggest priority for farmers in Kenya. The work Excellent Development does with communities terracing land, building sand dams and planting trees, helps to create an environment more conducive to sufficient food production by improving soil and water conservation. Sand dams further help by enabling enough water for vegetable nurseries.

Excellent Development also encourage the zero-grazing of livestock. Feeding and watering them from a pen in their compound creates manure to fertilise their farms.

**Rhoda, Farmer** - *'When I keep my animals in my cow shed, I just do a circle thing. All the manure comes to my shamba, and all the shamba stuff goes back to my animals, so it's one way of rotating whatever I have.'*

Nitrogen-fixing trees also help to fertilise the soil and keep more moisture there too – increasing crops yields.

**Charles, Farmer** - *'There are some of the trees that we plant, or to be planted in the shamba, and those trees can help us to maintain the moisture in the soil, because as the tree grows, the roots are growing and these roots of most of the trees, their roots help to lighten the soil. The soil will breathe and these trees when they grow up the leaves will fall down. Those leaves, they are still fertilisers and we can use them.'*

Traditionally farmers practised mixed cropping – effectively doubling the field space and increasing yields – by improved pest control and water retentions. Sadly though, this has been discouraged by government extension officers who are in favour of 'western methods' of single cropping.

**Rhoda, Farmer** - *'So many people in the last few years were told not to inter-crop by the government people, and I do this against the government will. The funny thing is, that when they come to see my shamba, they always get surprised of what I am doing because my yield seems to be more better than the people who doesn't inter-crop.'*

Excellent Development Field Officers work with farmers to encourage the mixed cropping of the staple crops maize and beans, which complement each other with their different ground coverage and root

networks. In addition they encourage farmers to grow a wider range of traditional food crops like sorghum, pearl millet, finger millet, pigeon peas and cow peas, reducing the risk of failed harvests – particularly as they are more suited to the dry areas.

Excellent don't encourage the growing of traditional cash crops like coffee. They require high inputs of labour, fertilisers and pesticides, and in Kenya, farmers have no choice over whom to sell it to, or at what price, and they often make no profit. By growing a wider range of crops, including fruit and vegetables, farmers can feed themselves and create a surplus – selling it when they want to, where they want to, and at what price they decide.

25% of the communities Excellent works with have serious problems in growing enough food. Following the drought of 2005/6, farmers had no seeds to plant. Committed to developing a sustainable solution Excellent Development launched a Seed Bank programme.

**Joshua, Excellent Development co-founder** - *'The Seed Bank programme that Excellent Development Kenya has, is to enable the groups in the marginal areas of Machakos and Makueni to bulk their own seed, to enable them to plant and return back to their stores. If we give them 2 kilos, we expect them to return 2 kilos, plus extra harvest from them, so that in future we can be able to help another community elsewhere.'*

Of course, food production isn't just about crops. Farmers grow trees for fruit and fodder for their animals – improving milk and meat production.

The communities in the more marginal areas can only afford goats and Excellent Development have implemented another sustainable programme to help them improve their goat breeds – producing four times the milk yield of local goats. Excellent Development has provided each region where they work with a pair of 75% Toggenberg goats. One self-help group has taken ownership of the goats – building their own goat pen and looking after the feeding and vet fees – funded by studding out the male. The goats are improved by breeding with each other and impregnating local goats – which take 3 generations to become 75% Toggenberg themselves. The design of the programme is ingenious though – the first three offspring from the Toggenbergs have to be given to other interested communities so they can set up their own scheme. This not only makes the project sustainable – but ensures expansion throughout interested communities. Apart from goat rotation and the passing on the knowledge of correct genetic management, Excellent's investment stops there.

This sums up the philosophy of Excellent Development's work in food production – helping farmers to create their own sustainable food security.