

Biovision

Newsletter June 2014

**Reviving traditional knowledge
to tackle current problems**

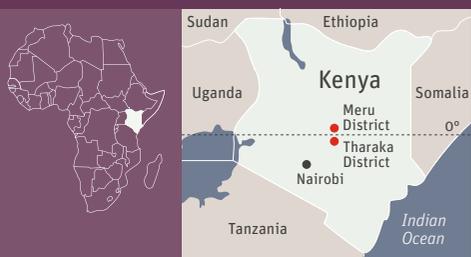


A future for all, naturally

Neftali Kian'a Miru
is a great-grandfather living
in Marimanti, Kenya



“If someone chops down a tree they
have to plant a new one!”



Traditional knowledge

- Project started in June 2011

In this project located in the catchment area of the River Kathita in Central Kenya, Biovision is helping local villages combine traditional knowledge with new sustainable methods.

- **Objectives of Project in 2013–2014**
 - Promote organic farming and the use of native seeds to a further 500 farming families
 - Provide practical training at the four new model fields
 - Implement sustainable environmental measures (reforestation, preventing bank erosion, terracing)

- **Budget 2014**
CHF 88 000.00

- **Account for donations**
PC 87-193093-4

Reviving traditional knowledge

In the Tharaka Plain, east of Mount Kenya, communities face ever more frequent droughts. As part of their response to this threat, they are building on knowledge handed down from their forefathers and growing traditional, native varieties – with success.

“Life was good here in the past,” explains the 82-year old Neftali Kian'a Miru from Marimanti, a village in the hot and arid Tharaka Plain. “We had enough to eat and people respected nature”. His two daughters, Virginia and Sabella, her daughter-in-law Josephine and his great-granddaughter Baraka prick up their ears. The old man continues: “It is now home to more and more people and they all need land and wood”. They have even cleared trees on Ntugi Hill,” he splutters. Nobody would have dreamt of doing that in the past as the summit of Ntugi is the place of their ancestors. “The fewer the trees, the less it rains. Droughts increase, yields fall and life becomes increasingly difficult”.

Without rain starvation looms

In addition, most arable farmers have switched to modern hybrid varieties that produce a higher yield. As a result, farmers are now reliant on the seed producers as they are unable to produce these hybrid seeds themselves. However, these new varieties cannot cope with the dry climate in Tharaka,” warns Neftali. “If it fails to rain, the crops soon wither and the result is often famine”. His widowed daughter Sabella nods in agreement: “In 2009, many families had to rely on food aid and earned nothing from their work in the fields.” She knows this from personal experience as she too had to sell her cattle so that she and her three children could survive.

Traditional varieties are more robust

Sabella is now back on her feet having chosen a different route. She belongs to a group of farmers who are taking part in an initiative run by the Institute for Culture and Ecology

(ICE), a Kenyan NGO and one of Biovision's local partners. ICE is committed to protecting the environment, maintaining traditional cultures and working to improve the lives of rural communities. In particular, it encourages farmers to use a combination of traditional knowledge and modern, organic methods of cultivation. This will ensure a sustainable use of natural resources. Reforestation using suitable tree species and the distribution of old crop varieties play an important role. Neftali and his daughters endorse this approach. For example, Sabella is cultivating five different types of finger millet and eleven species of sorghum. She grows five types of mung beans, eight types of cowpea and three pea varieties. “Demand for my produce is high and the sale of seeds is also going very well,” she says contentedly. Last year, she earned 50 000 Kenyan shillings (about CHF 500) just from seed sales.

Theory and practice

Sabella is convinced that the main factor in her success has been the practical support that ICE has provided locally. Her farmer group has also started to plant trees. They encourage the charcoal burners to leave the holy sites and are working to plant one new tree for every free felled. Once again, it's green on sacred Ntugi Hill and Neftali breathes a sigh of relief when he says “Our knowledge will be retained even when we oldies are long gone”.

For more photos see:

www.biovision.ch/tharaka_e



Traditional, native crops are often more resistant to a harsh environment than modern hybrid varieties. In Meru and Tharaka (Kenya), Biovision is supporting a project to collect and propagate seeds from native varieties, and distribute them to farmers.

Comment

Over many centuries, people in Eastern Africa developed knowledge and techniques that allowed them to survive even under harsh environmental conditions. They used sustainable farming practices and cultivated a wide range of species and varieties so that at least one species would produce a yield whatever the circumstances. However, during the process to modernise agriculture, such traditional knowledge was frowned upon. It was regarded as antiquated and was almost forgotten. The negative effects of that policy are now coming home to roost and it is small farmers who are bearing the brunt of increasing environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and unpredictable rainfall patterns. Many small farmers are now unable to afford artificial fertilisers, pesticides or hybrid seeds. Food production is becoming more and more difficult causing an increasing number of farming families to slide into poverty.

The Institute for Culture and Ecology (ICE) believes that these problems can be tackled by treating nature with respect and combining traditional techniques with modern organic practices. ICE is gathering the knowledge held by older people and working with communities to revive and propagate forgotten crop varieties. These are then shared with farmer groups and distributed more widely. At the same time, farmers are being trained in new organic methods of cultivation as a way of increasing their resilience to the major challenges that they face.



Sarah Muriithi
ICE Director (Thika), Biovision partner
in Kenya



Despite hard work, the yields and incomes of small farmers in Kenya are declining

Education as opportunity

There is considerable interest amongst farmers for knowledge relating to the theory and practice of ecologically sound development using sustainable methods. A clear strategy and financial resources are required in order to communicate this knowledge.

Caroline Nyakundi

Small-scale farming has not been profitable in Kenya for many years. Even so, it still makes a major contribution to the country's economy. According to figures from the Ministry of Agriculture, the sector accounts for 51% of Kenya's Gross Domestic Product (24% direct and 27% indirect through related parts of the economy). It would be only logical to assume, therefore, that agriculture – as a key player in most Sub-Saharan countries in Africa – would be well funded and supported by the Government. The opposite is true: In Kenya, public funding for agriculture has declined over the years and as a result farmers no longer have access to support and advice services. This particularly affects the small farming families who depend directly on agriculture. They are struggling with declining yields and reductions in income. In addition to the fact that the Government has largely left them to their own devices, they have to contend with ever more frequent droughts

or torrential rainfall as a result of climate change. They also face a growing threat from pest infestations and plant and animal diseases. They just cannot solve these problems on their own.

More people, but reduced soil fertility

There has also been a reduction in the land owned by small farmers in Africa: Most farming households in Kenya now farm less than 3 acres of land (1 hectare). In contrast, farmers in Switzerland farm on average about 45 acres (18 hectares). At the same time, Africa has more and more mouths to feed.

This reduction in arable land is the result of poor land management and population growth. The latter has brought about a fragmentation of agricultural holdings as land is divided up between more and more families. This has been exacerbated by the

phenomenon of “land grabbing” as countries in the Middle East and Asia buy up fertile land, particularly in Africa in order to improve their own food security. In addition, global companies and private investors from industrial and emerging nations have leased or bought agricultural land as an investment or to produce biomass for fuel production.

To this we need to add the problem of chemical fertilisers and poor farming methods. Both have contributed to a significant reduction in soil fertility. The rudimentary public advice services are just not up to the challenge of dealing with all these problems.

Role of the Farmer Communication Programme

Although no single way has been found to tackle these problems, experience gained with the Biovision Farmer Communication Programme (FCP) in Kenya over many years has shown that farmers can be reached using a combination of communication tools. In particular, there is no one-size-fits-all approach. Whereas most farmers in the United States and Europe can read and write, the opposite is true in Africa. It has the highest rate of illiteracy anywhere in the world and any approach must reflect this. What is clear, however, is that the FCP radio programmes are extremely effective at disseminating the main messages. However, different ways have to be found to reach farmers, particularly women who have little time to listen to the radio or cannot read. For example the farm demonstrations given by trained advisers. This training, which is provided in a relaxed, informal atmosphere, encourages farmer interaction and provides a forum for an open discussion of problems. Our printed magazine “The Organic Farmer” and website www.infonet-biovision.org – a sort of “Google” for farmers, – have proved extremely effective at reinforcing the messages broadcast on the radio or through training courses.

It is important to coordinate the dissemination of information when using a range of media. Each medium complements the other. Together they make up Biovision’s successful farmer information programme. An additional – and very effective tool – is the use of clear training videos and we are currently working

on finding the financial and technical resources to expand this element of the programme.

For more information see:
www.biovision.ch/fcp_e



Caroline Nyakundi is Editor in Chief of the Biovision farmer magazine “The Organic Farmer” and lives in Nairobi



John Cheburet (top), the dedicated editor of TOF Radio, reaches millions of interested farmers in Kenya through his radio advice programme

Village hosts nature cinema

It's a lively scene on the village square perched on the edge of the last remaining remnant of the Kakamega Rain Forest in Kenya: Local football stars play their hearts out in the local tournament and a theatre group uses humour and slapstick to entice the crowd into a large tent. Inside, hundreds – mainly children – crowd around a large screen where, spellbound, they watch “Bees are Life”, a documentary about bees. After the closing credits, James Ligare, coordinator of the Muliru farmers' group takes the microphone and explains how the risks facing bees represent a threat to the Kakamega Forest. He also tells them that if the forest were to disappear, it would mean an end to regular rainfall. Crops would dry out and drinking water would be in short supply.

The community cinema shows a whole range of different films on natural history and the environment. It is part of a new campaign to raise awareness of the importance of protecting the forest. The campaign, financed by Biovision, is run several times a year by the local “Muliru Farmers' Conservation Group” at various locations. The group is creating alternative sources of sustainable income for local communities in order to reduce the pressure on the endangered forest. This is part of a Biovision project in Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania supporting sustainable alternatives to the harmful exploitation of valuable forests.

For more information see:
www.biovision/kakamega_e



Urban farming in Assosa (Ethiopia): Yeshi Jima and Alemayew Weyeba grow some 20 different vegetables and fruits in their garden

Escape from the city

In Europe, growing fresh vegetables in our urban jungles is considered both trendy and practical. However, urban farming also offers opportunities for African cities. In Assosa, the district capital of Beningshangul Gumuz in Western Ethiopia, an enterprising couple are showing the way.

As you leave the hot, tarmac road, you immediately enter a green paradise. The garden of Alemayew Weyeba and his wife Yeshi Jima is a lush world where vegetables thrive under the shade of banana and fruit trees. As you stand in the midst of more than 20 different varieties, it's easy to imagine that you are in the country. However, this oasis is located right in the heart of the vibrant district capital, even if the clay houses – a type of housing common in Assosa where many live modestly – are more reminiscent of a village.

However, the splendid vegetable garden that gives its owners healthy food and extra income is unique. Its owners, Yeshi Jima and Alemayew Weyeba, were inspired by the “Assosa Biofarm” set up by the Ethiopian NGO “BioEconomy Africa” (BEA) and Biovision. Mrs Jima was one of 500 who attended an intensive course on organic agriculture, biological methods for tsetse fly control and healthcare. Her husband, who is a maintenance worker at the Biofarm School seeks to absorb as much of the course

content as possible and back home, he quickly puts what he has learned to good effect and tries it out in practice.

Alemayew now dreams of a life as a small farmer in the country. His dreams are counter to those of millions in Africa who want to escape their meagre existence in the country but who often end up stranded in some grim city slum. These two pioneers from Assosa could provide an example of how even in urban areas you can improve your diet and earn additional income.



“It’s about starting from the bottom”

A portrait of Geoffrey Brown, landscape architect and Biovision supporter



Geoffrey Brown knows Africa from first-hand experience having visited the continent as a young man when he spent three years sailing the world. He saw the problems that people in Africa had to face and how the supposed help from Northern countries often failed to meet their real needs. “The machines and equipment donated by aid agencies were sometimes left to rust because of a lack of spares. That had little to do with the daily challenges facing small farmers in Africa,” he remembers. Brown, who was born in England, later settled in Switzerland where his experiences in Africa shaped his professional ethics as a landscape architect. “It’s about starting from the bottom,” he explains. “If I am creating a “habitat” for people, animals and plants, I always start with what is there already”.

This focus on the basics and his affinity to

Africa led him to Biovision. “It was its use of targeted, sustainable solutions – from start to finish – that made Biovision so attractive to me”.

However, he also values the fact that Biovision projects include the spreading of knowledge. “The effect on the mind is as important as the effect on the soil – and this applies not just to Africa,” stresses Geoffrey Brown. He sees a particular need for industrialised countries to raise awareness of the value of food. “In England, about one-third of all food is thrown away unused,” he says with irritation. “How can we hope to feed the world if we do that?”

Geoffrey Brown has now returned to England and plans to settle in the far west of the country. I feel a particular empathy with its

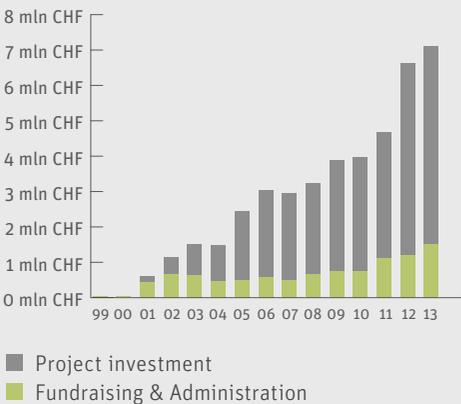
rural culture,” he says enthusiastically. “It feels like a homecoming”. He is also giving himself time and space to reflect on his life and sort his future. “I have already decided to include Biovision in my will,” he says. “It would be great if my example could persuade others to make a concrete commitment. It’s neither complicated nor time-consuming”.

Information on bequests:

If you are considering including Biovision in your will, please contact Alexandra Gebauer at any time for confidential advice. Phone +41 44 341 97 19
Email: a.gebauer@biovision.ch

Gratifying annual results for 2013

In 2013, we generated a record income of CHF 8.1 million. Many thanks for your support! Biovision recorded healthy growth and adopted a prudent investment policy. The ratio between project investment and administrative/fundraising expenditure was about 80:20. The full Annual Report can be found on our website at www.biovision.ch



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Neftali Kian'a Miru from Marimanti (Kenya) tells his great-granddaughter Baraka and her mother Josephine about the good old days
Photo: Peter Lüthi/Biovision

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Magnificent effort on behalf of the Camel Project

Primary school children in Sevelen took part in a fundraising campaign as part of www.getactive.ch. Pupils from Years 3 – 5 made bookends and letter trays from Plexiglas and wood. They were then sold – along with coffee and cake – at two open days for parents on 22 and 23 May and the proceeds donated to the Biovision project “Camels for drought areas”. Several children were so inspired by the camels that they painted bright posters during art classes and decorated the stands with them. As one of the pupils explained, “we wanted visitors to know immediately what it was all about”. Over the two days, they collected 1232 Swiss Francs for the project.

Class teacher Markus Bernet was really enthusiastic: “The campaign was a great success and all those who took part thought it was great fun! You can see the fantastic results at www.getactive.ch. Hopefully, our efforts will inspire other schools to take part”. We should like to thank the young artists for their spirited efforts!

Would you like to do something for Biovision? See www.getactive.ch or contact Samuel Trachsel at Biovision.

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Year 3 pupils from Sevelen and Michel Terrettz, a volunteer at Biovision wait eagerly for customers. It required much concentration to cut out the camels.



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