

**A VIBRANT RURAL ECONOMY IN THE 21ST CENTURY – AN ETHIOPIAN PERSPECTIVE.**

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**Abstract**

*The author was assigned to the city of Awassa in Southern Ethiopia in late 2006 to advise on “urban agriculture”. Land within the city limits is allocated to investors both in agriculture and other industries. I concentrated my efforts on the dairy sector, where it became apparent that encouraging the development of milk production within the city should maybe not be a priority. This was vividly brought home to me when I accompanied the members of an NGO in the distribution of goats for humanitarian aid to farmers just 10 km from the centre of Awassa, a city having over 100,000 inhabitants. What’s more the community was located on the shores of the 100 sq km Lake Awassa. With such a favourable situation and a large expanding market on their doorstep why are these farmers not amongst the most prosperous rural dwellers in the area? The reasons I attempt to address in this paper.*

*Keywords: urban agriculture, development*

**Introduction**

The author recently came across the ‘stupid cow syndrome’ in an article on ‘demand chains’ which seems relevant to the subject at hand. Basically this runs as follows: “complaints are made to tanneries on the low quality of leather who then blame slaughter houses for the poor preparation of hides. They in turn blame the farmers for the poor quality of cattle; however the farmers say we can’t help it and blame the ‘poor old cow’ for scratching itself on barbed wire fencing”.

The subject of this paper are based on the author’s brief visit to Ethiopia towards the end of 2006 and the above reference appears to reflect his conclusions.

**Background**

The visit to Ethiopia which took place in October/November 2006, was a one month assignment on behalf of the U.K. volunteer organisation VSO. The mission was to investigate ‘urban agriculture’ in the city of Awassa the capital of the Southern People’s Region in the south of the Country. Following a short briefing in Addis Ababa, three weeks were spent in Awassa which lies one third of the way towards the Kenyan border about 270 km south of the capital in the Rift Valley on the shores of a picturesque lake which bears it’s name. During the final week on my return trip, a short stop was made at Ziway another large lake about 100 km before Addis and the last few days visiting various organisations and a large dairy processing unit in the capital itself. Throughout this assignment the marvellous hospitality and support received seemed completely at odds with the apparent backwardness of the rural areas in this wonderful Country. The paradox is that although it possesses the largest cattle population of any Country in Africa many urban dwellers do not appear to have good access to milk or other dairy products. Other daily requirements such as fruit and vegetables are sometimes transported long distances though suitable growing conditions may be close at hand. Much has been recorded on the reasons for this situation and the reader is referred to the references listed to learn more.

## **A Short History**

The writer first visited Ethiopia in 1969 whilst proceeding on leave from Kenya. The purpose was to visit a colleague with whom he had studied for the postgraduate Diploma in Tropical Agriculture at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad three years previously. Hans Johannson was a member of a Swedish team working on the Chilalo Agricultural Development Unit (CADU) which was funded by the Swedish Development Agency (SIDA) and became very well known throughout the developing world as a front runner in investigating and implementing strategies for rural development. Hans was based in the Arsi region very near to Awassa and the abiding memory of that time were the vast herds of cattle yet the difficulty of obtaining fresh milk and a rather memorable horse riding experience – horses being very important for transport in Ethiopia. The objectives of the project included: (i) the achievement of economic and social development throughout the project area; (ii) the continued search for suitable methods to bring about agricultural development in Ethiopia when applied in an integrated manner; and (iii) the creation of possibilities for application elsewhere in the Country. In fact the project continued well into the 1980s, was replicated by others, one of which was the Welaita Agricultural Development Unit in Shewa and could be considered to have a fair degree of success. Unfortunately in surveys carried out later it does not seem to have had any great effect on rural poverty with those farmers living in the former project area apparently being no better off than those elsewhere. This may be due to other events during the period of the Derg. Also of course, Ethiopia gained the attention of the world during the dreadful famines of the mid 1980s though their main focus was in the north of the Country. A huge number of International Aid organisations initiated activities at that time and many of them are still operating to this day. This begs the question as to why has there not been a dramatic improvement in the well-being of the rural population as one might expect from these well intended interventions.

## **Awassa At The Dawn Of The Millennium**

According to the Ethiopian calendar the new millennium will commence in what is August 2007 in the conventional calendar. With just one month to go this is perhaps a very appropriate moment to assess the city's current position. Arriving in Awassa towards the end of the rainy season, which is slightly later than further north, it was impressive to approach the city during a heavy rainstorm following travel through hot, dry country. Indeed the countryside for the last 50km was relatively green.

The next pleasant surprise was that the accommodation provided was a small pleasant hotel with a modern gym and meeting hall attached. Within 400m were facilities for all efficient communication needs, digital photos download and printing and ready transport by taxi or gari (horse drawn cart) to any part of the city. ONGOing road development is impressive with broad paved streets set out on a block basis on which the taxis run, whilst on the dirt (rather dusty!) smaller thoroughfares linking them, the gari was the best option. One very good legacy of the brief Italian occupation are the coffee shops with cakes and pastries. Later in travelling further afield it was possible to appreciate the 'ribbon development'. For example on one street about 2km in length, one end with finished buildings of shops, businesses and houses graduated through just completed buildings to the far end where construction was very much in progress. From a nearby hill it is apparently possible to look down on the city and to see the road network laid out in a pattern reflecting the initials of Haile Selassie. He had a palace not far distant on the lake and this was one of his favourite retreats.

## **Awassa Urban Agriculture Development**

The assignment was through REMSEDA which is the regional body responsible for micro and small enterprise development. Immediate superiors were the Awassa City Administration (ACA) with temporary offices in the bus station but for the purposes of the assignment office space was provided at a

nearby vocational training centre which came under their auspices and enabled a much easier working environment.

At this point it is useful to consider the resources that were available in the City to obtain the background information for the task.

There is an excellent Research Station which was within easy walking distance which does impressive work within the Southern Region. This area is one of the most favourable for enset (false banana) a plant peculiar to Ethiopia and considerable work has been done on its value in providing food security for rural families. Of particular interest was the favourable interaction of this crop and livestock. The station has small plots near their HQ in town and a larger area of land near the main university.

The Agricultural University is also in the centre of town boasting an attractive campus and a large student intake. The total number of students at this and the large modern campus of Debu University on the edge of town is well over eight thousand contributing to Awassa's reputation as a young rapidly developing city. A notable feature of Brazil, where the last IFMA meeting took place, was that young people still consider there to be a worthwhile career in agriculture with appropriate courses well filled (c.f. the present situation in many Western economies) and the same could be said for Ethiopia.

### **Urban Agriculture**

In such a brief stay it was decided that the dairy industry was perhaps the most important sector that needed addressing, so efforts were directed to that end though a cursory look was extended to other activities. In effect the ACA has control over land within the City boundaries and is empowered to allocate it to businesses and enterprises which it considers to be of major priority for the City development, taking into account planning and environmental considerations. There were two major inputs in the dairy sector: (i) NGO supported milk production by Women's Groups, (ii) private investment in dairy units by individuals. Two examples of each of these were studied.

(i) The Groups visited were located to the north west of the city, not too distant from farm land and near the main highway. Thus access was good. In fact there is a cluster of NGO supported enterprises located adjacent to each other. The two examined in detail were quite similar to each other. Both had substantial buildings capable of housing about ten cows but which were dark, poorly ventilated and not considered to be a good use of funds. One Group was being badly advised on feeding by their extension agent and water was not available 24hrs for the housed animals. These were management criticisms but perhaps more pertinent is doubt about the system in general. Almost all the roughage feed which at that time consisted of maize stover and cereal straw had to be carted and disposal of manure would soon be a problem. However these issues could be even more of a drawback for the other private investments.

(ii) These were located to the south west of the city, reached through intense urban development and backing onto the hills. They were planned for around 50 cows each. Thus the environmental aspects are likely to be a problem and the plans to put in a pasteurising unit by one of the Groups was debatable in terms of the location as it would be hardly practicable to transport milk from outside. Water was being sourced from a new well and this could have implications for the supply to the city even though it is near the lake shore.

There are two other general points. Firstly the land for these enterprises is subject to reallocation should the ACA decide that a site is needed for a more lucrative industrial producer (there is already a large textile factory in the city) so there is no guarantee of tenure. Secondly milk is in exceedingly short supply within the city with most deliveries of raw milk being door to door through the informal sector, the price being 20 – 25% higher than in areas where supply better meets demand. Thus there must be a question

mark over whether people are prepared to pay a higher price for processed milk until production has been raised and the price of raw milk comes down.

Other urban agricultural development was very much dominated by NGO finance.

Some of these were excellent and here one can single out a local one – JeCCDO, Jerusalem Children and Community Development Organisation which has a fairly recently opened branch in Awassa. Their annual report for 2004 has a photo of British prime minister Tony Blair visiting one of their demonstration gardens near Addis Ababa: though this generated considerable media exposure and publicity there was no direct funding increase from the U.K.'s overseas aid programme! Urban agriculture is one of their community based child care activities it was stimulating to be taken to see some of their beneficiaries in town who on pocket sized areas of land next to their houses were keeping chickens or growing vegetables with extension input from their staff.

Another NGO supported by USAID funding were in the process of replicating a micro irrigation project that had been successful around Addis Ababa. Their urban agriculture programme was aimed at HIV affected women who were organised into Groups and provided with drip irrigation equipment plus inputs and extension advice. Criticised by some for doubts over the sustainability of using imported equipment, they are in the process of trying to identify a local manufacturer. From the pictures seen it was certainly having a huge immediate impact on people's lives.

In terms of the author's understanding of urban agriculture, these two latter example are exactly what fits the bill and were already receiving good input from these and other NGOs.

## **Rural Development**

Although not within the remit of the assignment, advantage was taken of an offer of two visits to the surrounding rural communities at weekends. The first embarking from the Research Station, was a chance encounter one Saturday morning and entailed a trip of 50 km to the western side of the lake to look at some soyabean trial plots on small farms. These were being managed by Self Help International an NGO funded by Irish Aid who have a large financial input into Southern Ethiopia. There was a very impressive turnout with the National Director of Research with many of his staff plus Ministry of Agriculture and other NGO extension staff and the sites and whole day's outing organised in a very efficient and professional manner with a television film crew on hand also.

Two weeks later as a guest of GOAL (another Irish NGO) a much shorter trip was made to a community located just outside the City boundary (less than 15km from the centre) on the lake shore to observe the distribution of meat goats to provide the farmers with income generating potential.

Other NGOs who work in rural development include Farm Africa, World Vision, SOS Sahel, SNV all of whom are international. There are also many smaller local ones doing equally good work.

## **Commercial**

Just 20km from Awassa at Melge Wendo was the other face of Ethiopian Agriculture in the form of a meat and vegetable factory. The slaughter house was another legacy of the Italian occupation, built in the late 1930s It was well managed and though the facility is somewhat dated the cleanliness and hygiene standards were impressive. A mob of cattle in the holding pens waiting for slaughter were of very good quality. Run by the El Fora company which has marketing outlets to Countries in the Middle and Far

East, the facilities were taken over from Government about 10 years ago and El Fora has similar investment in other areas of the Country also.

Back in town, checking on the availability of feeds for cattle, a government-run mill and a private enterprise were visited. The former though very well run and the manager was to be commended, were hampered by the usual bureaucracy and having to pay their taxes (as he lamented!) such that they were only running at about one quarter of their capacity. They could not compete with the dozen or so private mills which have sprung up and are easily able to undercut prices.

### **Ziway Experience**

This is another lake in the drier part of the Rift Valley but where there has been some development of irrigation. It is in fact a supplier of vegetables to Awassa as had been evidenced in their city market previously. The SEDA project was visited on the shores of the lake where a joint operation between U.S. based 'Heifer International' and U.K. based 'Send a Cow' is providing credit in kind by the provision of heifers to small farmers. This author's presentation during the last IFMA meeting in Brazil on similar work in Western Kenya explains how the system works. Here development is more recent but progressing well.

Again there is a huge contrast and some element of competition with a large development on the Western shore of the lake by a Dutch company to produce flowers for the European market. The building of polytunnels proceeds apace with the objective of eventually covering 360 ha when at full capacity. The company is investing in local facilities including schools and health centres for its many employees. Provided there is careful regulation, so that there is limited damage to the environment and supervised control of water use, the positive side is that about four thousand people are employed who apart from earning a very good income have been provided by the company with a school, health centre and recreation facilities.

### **Dairy Development Enterprise – Addis Ababa**

A State run milk processing factory in the city, it was visited on behalf of a colleague who had been carrying out a similar task to myself in the Capital city.

Pasteurising and packaging milk and producing butter, yoghurt and cheese it was again encouraging to see a public enterprise so well managed. At the time they had an intake of 22,000 litres of milk per day from the surrounding hinterland including producers large and small. The manager was to be congratulated on the good hygiene but he admitted one problem that I had not come across elsewhere in Africa previously, which was the fact that Ethiopia has almost 200 fasting days throughout the year during which the predominantly Muslim population are not permitted to drink milk. There is a limit to the amount of milk that can be made into cheese etc so the alternative is to package UHT (long life) milk for which new investment was required. An up to date packaging machine for the ordinary milk had been installed not long previously but the source of funding for this new initiative had not yet been found. With private dairies springing up in the vicinity one could see a similar situation developing: private versus public as was the case with the flour mills in Awassa.

Discussions were later held with SNV (Netherlands Development Organisation) who are implementing improvements to the milk supply chain as part of a European Union funded programme named BOAM. This is an acronym for 'support to business organisations and their access to markets'. Under this programme cereals and dairy were being covered in Oromia Region and pineapples and honey production in the Awassa area.

## Summary

In order to provide some positive messages to REMSEDA it was considered necessary to “think outside the box” which was made possible by the ‘extra’ visits were made and not provided for at the outset of the placement.

The suggestion was made that before too much attention is given to processing requirements, the production of milk from the rural areas should be increased until the liquid market in Awassa was satisfied and the price stabilized at the levels seen elsewhere. There are two ways in which this can be addressed fairly quickly. Firstly by increasing the number of higher producing animals on small farms through the ‘pass-on’ schemes of the NGOs as is already in operation at Ziway. There is a strong chance that the Heifer/Send a Cow partnership will extend their activities to this area in the near future as they already have another project further south in Arba Minch and it is their intention to concentrate activities in Oromia and the SNNP regions.

Secondly: increased extension input in the rural areas would be necessary and it was suggested to VSO that they might consider some longer term volunteers supporting the extension services in this respect.

## Conclusion

The title of this paper seems to be at odds with the task which the author was asked to perform but in long experience of working in Africa the gulf between urban and rural development has never appeared to be more pronounced. On reflection it is perhaps relevant to consider the situation in neighbouring East African Countries. In Kenya for example, everyone has a ‘shamba’ (farm) in the rural areas and on retirement the high fliers from the cities usually return to their home areas where they often use their skills to promote development. Thus there are often good health centres, schools, services such as piped water and electricity and generally a high standard of living. However in Ethiopia it appears to be somewhat of a vicious circle. Lack of infrastructure outside of the urban areas means that there is little incentive to ‘move back’ so that the gulf gets wider.

One other suggestion was that every opportunity should be taken to facilitate exchange of personnel between Kenya and Ethiopia for example. Each has a lot to offer to the other.

As to why it was necessary to distribute animals in what is to all intents and purposes humanitarian aid on the outskirts of a city the size of Awassa despite all the historical and political reasons remains a mystery. With the talented people, the well founded institutions and productive countryside Ethiopia seems to have everything going for it. Perhaps the question should be asked of that ‘poor old cow’!

**One final footnote:** as an acknowledgement of the hospitality and friendships made on this assignment the author’s wish was to do a little more to assist Awassa in its impressive development. Many people in his home city of Bath in the U.K. know that H.E. Haile Selassie lived in Bath in exile during the second world war. He was such a gentleman that his presence is still fondly remembered. Near to Awassa is a much visited spa and Bath is famous for its own spa. Both cities are of a similar size and have very progressive Universities. Thus attempts are being made to see if some kind of partnership can be established which could be to the benefit of both cities for the present and new millenniums.

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