

Hope in a harsh landscape

The Kenya Red Cross is helping to build 'climate-smart' food security in drought-affected areas

April 2012

The Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS) is this year intensifying its drive to find ways to reinforce the climate-resilience of food supplies in the aftermath of the latest drought that left an estimated 4 million Kenyans food-insecure.

More than 300,000 people of Wajir district in the dry North Eastern Province know all about it – the failure of the short rains at the end of 2010 and the lateness of long rains several months later pushed many to the edge of survival. The area is mainly dependent on livestock, and over the years communities have been impoverished by continual losses of animals. Former pastoralists who no longer have access to this traditional livelihood settled along main roads and are reliant on relief food.

KRCS is now providing alternative livelihoods in the form of irrigated agriculture, using Israeli technology and in collaboration with Amiran Kenya – one of the country's leading agricultural suppliers. This integrated food-security project – made possible with finance from the Safaricom Foundation, a charity funded by the country's biggest telecoms provider – aims to cushion more than 5,000 people in Wajir from water scarcity and food insecurity.

A new irrigation and supply system feeding six large greenhouses and fields was constructed along with three

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shallow wells equipped with solar pumps and storage tanks. Launched in March 2012 in Wajir East District, where at least 30 per cent of the population relies on food aid, the project cost only 14m Kenyan shillings (US\$ 170,000). It was rolled out using community volunteers as well as KRCS staff and experts.

The Safaricom Foundation's goodwill ambassador and former vice-president of Kenya, Moody Awori, urged Kenyans to take up environmental conservation like planting trees and protecting existing water catchments.

KRCS Secretary General Abbas Gullet described Wajir East as a "short-rain-dependent marginal community". A combination of poor water supplies and inadequate diet had left people there acutely susceptible to disease. Said Gullet: "It's because of this in our minds that the project has included the construction of three EcoSan [waterless] toilets at each water tapping point to reduce the communities' waterborne-disease burden, and to be an entry point for dialogue with the community on communicable disease."

The project is a prototype for nearly 30 others countrywide that KRCS launched after the very successful "Kenyans for Kenya"

initiative that raised 10 million dollars in just two months to assist communities affected by drought.

Among other "climate-smart" disaster risk reduction (DRR) projects coming to fruition is one in Machakos district, south-east of Nairobi, where they are eagerly awaiting the harvest of drought-resistant cassava in a few months – a variety developed by the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) (see reverse, Machakos cassava).

KARI is one of the largest research centres in Africa, but its innovations often get "stuck in the laboratory", as the KRCS deputy-secretary general in charge of programmes and knowledge, James Kisia, puts it. "Our unique partnership with the research institute, in effect, brings university to village."

Daniel Kiswily, a Yatta farmer and member of the local CBO, holds up a new drought-resistant strain of cassava developed by Kenyan agronomists.

(Photo: Tamara Leigh/IFRC Nairobi)



Kisia adds: “We realised KARI was doing a lot of good work, but for it to be translated to action we needed a conduit, and this is the role KRCS is now ably playing: paving the way for the uptake of new and useful innovations in food production. The cassava needs half the moisture maize does, and its yield is many times that of maize.”

The KRCS role was to “create awareness of the value of growing this kind of plant,” Kisia explains, drawing up the actual beneficiary lists and providing what he calls the “psychological contract” with the community.

Kisia adds: “We’ve stayed in the Machakos communities to support learning among farmers, continuously nurturing the partnership with KARI and the community to catalyse learning and feedback *from* the community *to* the scientists.”

These projects and others – like “Integrating Health Risks in a Changing Climate”, in Nyando near Lake Victoria, which sees the local KRCS branch partnering with the meteorological service to translate and disseminate seasonal forecasts – are part of a full-scale drive by the Red Cross in Kenya to make its work to build resilience more climate-smart. Long-term DRR work in Nyando includes elevating houses, keeping water channels clear, digging new trenches, and flood defences.

Much of this work is truly sustainable – the irrigation hardware involved running off solar energy. And *locally funded*: not dependent on possibly shrinking western aid-budgets. “There’s hardly a single bank or major corporation in Kenya that is not involved with us in some climate-related project,” says James Kisia. “They’re powerful partnerships.”



Yatta district farmers and *jua kali* millers dig for development

by Tamara Leigh, IFRC Nairobi

“It should be raining here by now, but you can’t predict these things anymore,” says Joe Mbalu, coordinator of the

Machakos district branch of the Kenya Red Cross Society (KRCS). About this time last year, the long rains were getting underway; now it feels like the peak of the dry season.

Driving out of bustling Machakos town through the surrounding hills, we get deeper into drier, marginal agricultural land, passing plots full of dead maize-crop, over dried-up river beds. The land appears increasingly arid for farming. “Most rivers have dried up now,” Joe explains. “They only fill temporarily in the rainy season.

“The British introduced maize farming in the 1950s – along with the idea it represents ‘civilized living’. It’s still alive in the farming community, and it’s essential to encourage farmers to change the way they’ve worked for 50 years.”

After many years of food insecurity, crop failure, and dependence on relief, KRCS is working with local farmers and the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) to develop drought-resistant crops. In the full midday heat, we arrive in Yatta at the local farmers’ community-based organization (CBO), whose members proudly show off their flourishing crop of a newly developed, drought-resistant cassava strain – one of the new “dry crops” being tested in Kenya.

The Yatta farmers have also just completed a *jua kali* (Kiswahili for “hot sun” which refers to the open-air informal economy) mill to make cassava flour and sell it to buyers who have approached KRCS. Cassava can be stored in the ground, milled or sold. Crucially for development, it can help farmers move beyond subsistence farming to generating income by turning it into industrial starch, of which there’s an acute shortage in Kenya.

KRCS in Machakos is helping communities decide their own development priorities. “We have big plans to build a cassava factory, to try and industrialize the village,” says David Muoka as he enthusiastically shows us around his factory. “This is our wish, God willing.”

The view here is that smallholders and pastoralists should be supported with similar investments in the innovative management of natural resources, flexible financial schemes, technical advice, and new crops and livestock breeds.

Another Yatta farmer tells us he hopes steps like these will help the district – long on the relief beneficiary-list – to be secure in food, along with the rest of the country. “We don’t want to be dependent on food aid. We want to dig for our children and our futures.”

Back at the Machakos branch, Joe and Kris Schroeder, a volunteer from the Australian Red Cross, show us their new pizza oven. They will buy cassava flour from the Yatta farmers and use it to make pizza base for the branch’s own restaurant. And a takeout service will add to the income-generation potential.

[For more information please email: info@kenyaredcross.org]



Joe Mbalu, coordinator of the Machakos branch of the Kenya Red Cross, with its new pizza oven that it's hoped will run on drought-resistant cassava flour grown and milled locally. (Photo: Tamara Leigh/IFRC Nairobi)