

A Tanzanian Snapshot

Don Mercer
Associate Professor, Food Science
Kemptville Campus University of Guelph

For the past three years, the University of Guelph's Kemptville Campus has been leading one of about seven "Education for Employment" projects in Tanzania. These are sponsored by the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) through the Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC) of which the Kemptville Campus is a member. Our project with the Kihonda Regional Vocational Training Centre in Morogoro is aimed at increasing their instructional capacity through the development of course material. These courses are designed to meet the needs of local farmers and to train young people of the region in various agricultural and food processing practices.

It has been my privilege to be part of these efforts since the project began. Now, on my fourth trip to Morogoro, there is still an overwhelming sense of just how fragile things are in this part of the world. The precarious nature of the situation is most obvious during the four-hour drive from Dar es Salaam (Tanzania's major city and port on the Indian Ocean) to the higher elevations of Morogoro, about 180 kilometres to the west.

It is mid-February, and while my family is coping with temperatures of -19C back home in Canada, the temperature here is a humid 34C. The dry season is coming to an end, and even the local residents are complaining bitterly about the oppressive heat. They are looking forward to the relief promised by the rainy season set to begin in a few weeks time.

On the way to Morogoro, we pass literally hundreds of small-holder farms - each only a few acres in size. There is a great deal of activity as the land is being prepared for seeding before the rains come. Then, there will be the uncertainty that each year's growing season brings with it. Most of the fields look empty now, but for those fortunate enough to be near a river or a stream, there are occasional patches of green indicating the presence of irrigation.

In areas where the land is not favourable for growing crops, the Masai can be seen with their cattle grazing along the roadside. Nearer to Morogoro, there are vast tracts of sisal used for fibre - remnants of the plantations that once were more common here. Roadside stands appear in a few isolated pockets selling produce grown in local vegetable gardens. Paul, our driver, makes it a point to stop at the stands to pick up onions, carrots, and tomatoes which are much cheaper here than in the markets of Dar es Salaam where he and his family live.

Adding to my interest are articles appearing in the two newspapers which I have been reading as we drive. Both "The Guardian" and "The Citizen" have numerous stories about various food-related topics. There are stories of how the National Food Reserve Agency in Tanzania is planning to sell 20,000 tonnes of maize from its stock to help

avert hunger. This is in addition to a previous release of 20,000 tonnes to millers to help keep the price of flour affordable.

In a country where about 80% of the economy is based on agriculture, it is not hard to see the tremendous impact that drought and other threats can have. Unfortunately, most of sub-Saharan Africa is in the same predicament. In response, Tanzanian seed multiplication centres have recently released twenty-two new hybrid cereal seed varieties to deliver higher yields in spite of drought and disease. Naturally enough, most of these are maize upon which there is a great reliance.

In spite of these efforts, there are new threats to the economy. Most recently, two diseases have begun affecting Tanzania's cassava crop. This food staple is being attacked by cassava mosaic disease and cassava brown streak virus. Unsuspecting farmers are often not even aware of the problem and the need to take remedial action until much of their crop has been lost.

University researchers have launched a new program to inform the public about the benefits of adopting various procedures to enhance production and yield. Their target audience is the staggering thirty-three million or more small-holder farms in Africa. The majority of these farmers are women, and they produce upwards of 90% of Africa's food supply. With Africa's population expected to rise to two billion by 2050, there are huge challenges that must be faced to increase production by as much as 70% to meet these anticipated demands.

On one of my first trips, there was a feeling of helplessness, and even hopelessness, when looking at the enormous problems facing the agri-food sector in sub-Saharan Africa. I have now come to realize that we cannot solve all of the problems, but by addressing situations at the local level, international efforts can go a long way in helping provide food security to this part of the world in the years to come.



Sisal growing in a field along the side of the highway in the Morogoro Region of Tanzania