

Coping with drought in Tanzania

Background



Photo: Gladys Makwasa/Tearfund

The two year severe drought in the Northern Mara region of Tanzania has caused acute food shortages and malnutrition, especially among women and children.

After very poor rainy seasons in 2009, when food and cash crop production plummeted by 50-70 percent, the annual long rains in 2010 faltered across much of the country and closed below normal. Close to 85 percent of the maize, millet, sorghum and cassava crops in the Northern Mara region have been affected. There are also serious water shortages, lack of pasture and massive loss of livestock. Children have stopped going to school and families are selling whatever they have to buy food. Some young girls are being forced to marry into wealthy households so that their families can buy food with their dowries, while others are turning to prostitution. People are eating the seeds intended for planting during the next rains and instead of working their fields they are travelling to other areas to look for work.

Tearfund's partner sets up Farmer Field Schools

Tearfund's partner, Africa Inland Church (AICT), is working with drought-affected communities in Mara region, empowering them to take a leading role in the establishment of their own sustainable food security solutions. Although this is a new project, through the use of Farmer Field Schools (FFS) they have already seen a phenomenal adoption of improved farming methods with communities practising soil conservation and fertility techniques as well as planting improved and more drought resistant seed varieties.

Each village-based FFS is made up of 10 to 20 small scale farmers who are trained to effectively demonstrate to their fellow villagers how to adopt and implement improved farming methods, thereby disseminating the benefits throughout each community. Key lessons include land preparation techniques, fertility improvement, crop spacing and preparation of farmer calendars. Farmers are provided with improved seed varieties and farm implements (such as ox ploughs) to help them put into practice what they have learnt.

Rainwater harvesting is another priority for these communities. AICT is helping them to work with the government to develop plans for the construction of earth dams to improve rainwater retention and conservation. Government engineers have already undertaken both the reconnaissance and topographical surveys for one dam project and the survey drawings and bills of quantities have been prepared.

Impacts

In all these activities the communities are learning to network and establish partnerships with other stakeholders such as the government, individuals and other NGOs. They are also finding their voices in terms of calling for justice. For example, in Kabasa where the middlemen were ignoring the price increment instituted by the government, the community pressurised local government leaders to do something about it. In response, the local government office declared that no one was allowed to sell their crops until the dealers adhered to the new prices, threatening the middlemen with severe action unless they complied with the rules. This was unlike the past when exploitation of farmers was of little concern to local government officials.

Alongside these longer term interventions, AICT is trying to avert severe malnutrition by providing basic food supplies in the form of maize and beans, particularly targeting the most vulnerable households headed by women and children. Such food distributions will give farmers the energy to attend to their fields during the long rains period and help to prevent migration away from the area.