

The Yatta Guides of Kenya

by Dan Schellenberg with Simon Batchelor

The word *guide* is used for people sent out to find the way for the village; such as the way to information, a grazing area or water in times of drought. It refers to those who are gifted at seeing the way forward. These people have no official status, are humble and respected for their willingness to put effort into finding answers to problems.

The Kamba people, the third largest tribe in Kenya, have a fairly typical rural African lifestyle. Their land is mostly semi-arid scrub brush dotted with smallholdings or *shambas*. The wife and children generally live on the *shamba* while the husband goes to the city. In the 1980s they grew maize, cotton and a few vegetables. These crops could fail as often as one season in two. Could the average family improve yields by changing the management of their scarce resources? This was the question that faced a small development project in Yatta.

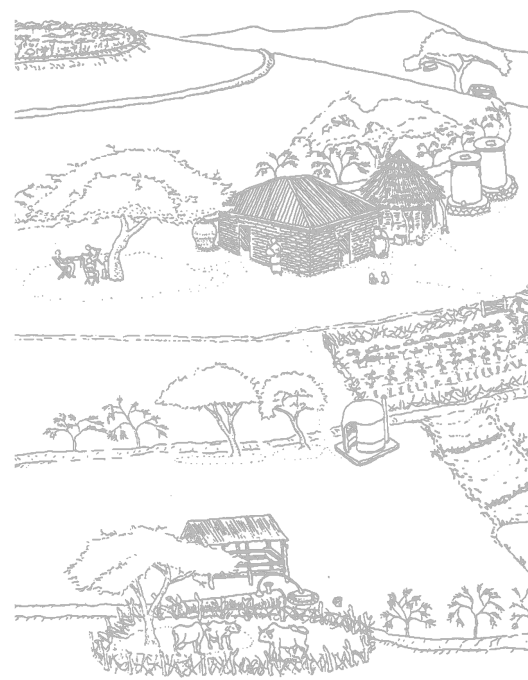
The first step was to discuss local concerns among seven families (helped by an outsider, known as a *guide*). Their most immediate need was to store water for the dry season. Women spent half their time fetching firewood and water. But tackling the need for water would require money, and none of the families had spare money. There was no credit available and the families lived too far apart to be able to co-operate on a single project.

Finding the funds

However, each family did have two oxen, (or donkeys or cows) which were yoked together for ploughing with their traditional harness. Recently an improved harness had been developed at

Nairobi University which could be used by a single animal. The harness cost a relatively small amount which the families could raise. After a trial period, the families using the harness proved that one ox was sufficient to work the land. A major benefit of the harness was that the weakest animal could be sold for enough money to buy cement and wire – enough to build a 20,000 gallon rain catchment tank. The tank was simply a hole in the ground with a ferro-cement lining. The tank supplied a family's water for six months without rain with some extra to sell to neighbours.

Water from the tank was very muddy and carried the risk of disease. An upward flow filter made from sand and charcoal (see *Footsteps* 35) was used to purify drinking water. As this needed a single bag of cement to build, it could be



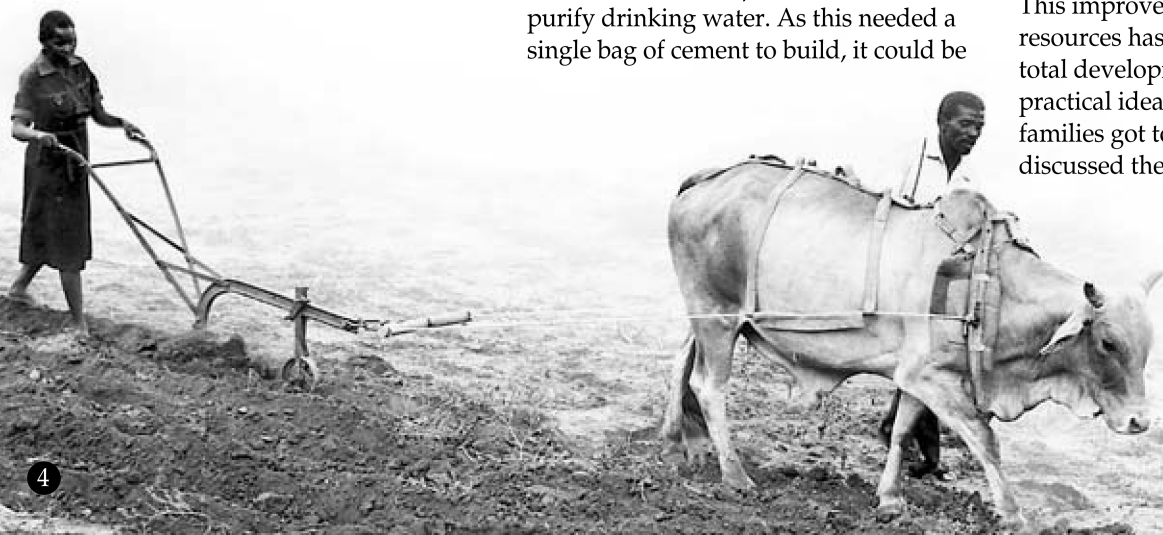
made at the same time as the lining of the catchment tank.

Choosing trees

Building the tank provided a practical introduction to the principles of land management and, in particular, erosion control. Trees had to be planted to prevent the water washing away topsoil as it ran into the tank. This sort of agroforestry planting contrasts sharply with the traditional practice of planting annual crops on bare soil, where the soil is easily eroded by rain. A leguminous fuel and forage tree, *Leucaena leucocephala*, was introduced. A second tree, *Moringa oleifera*, which also bears protein-rich beans, was introduced (*Footsteps* 20 and 28). The crushed seeds of this tree were used to clear the water before using the filter. Now the seven households had achieved a marked improvement in their lifestyle with a potential for extra income.

This improved use of their existing resources has to be seen in the light of the total development process. These practical ideas arose when just a few families got together with a guide and discussed their problems. After making

Photo: Dan Schellenberg

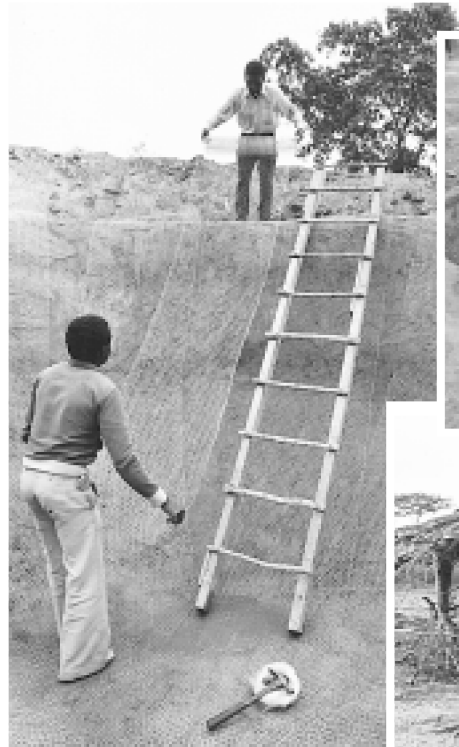




these improvements the novelty of their new income distracted some from making further improvements to their resource management. They bought radios, watches and other luxury goods. The radios provided a source of outside information. This period of adjustment allowed their neighbours to see the benefits of the improvements supported by surplus water from the tank. People also began experimenting with market gardening using the water from the catchment tank. With some planning, and the sale of these vegetables to neighbours in the dry season, people found that income from the water could be doubled.

Change for the better

The new skills of building with concrete helped some people start businesses and become craftsmen. The technology used in lining the water catchment tank was used to build simple concrete bins for storing grain. On average, over half of the harvested crop was lost after harvest through poor storage. Concrete bins protected it from rats and insects. However, grain stored this way had to be well dried, so a simple solar grain dryer was introduced. The dry grain required longer cooking time. Having introduced firewood management at the same time as tree planting for erosion control, they found that an efficient stove made better use of fuel. Later on they introduced biogas production, a technique which uses cow dung to produce light, fuel and



Improving the water supply.

Above: making the ferrocement lining to the new rain catchment tank.

fertiliser. Many of their neighbours copied the various improvements.

However, resources are not just physical. These families also began to manage their social resources. They sat and talked with their neighbours about problems and how to find solutions. They, in turn, started acting as guides. When a problem was identified, one of the group – usually the guide – went to the nearby city to try to find new ideas and information on how to solve that problem. Information proved to be the most critical resource. Their problem had often been solved already. They just had to find out where and make adaptations to the local situation.

Act of generosity

Finally they found that they had to manage their spiritual resources too. The rain catchment was copied by many neighbours. However, few copied the grain store. When asked why, the neighbours couldn't decide if it was good or evil. The catchment tank obviously had God's blessing as he filled it with life-giving water. But the store had yet to show good or bad omens, so people were prepared to wait several years before

Using the new energy-efficient stove.



Children using a small hand pump in front of a small water tank covered to slow evaporation and keep out livestock and children.

trusting them. The breakthrough came after a two year drought when all the Christian guides opened up their stores of seed (worth a fortune) and gave their neighbours enough to plant for the coming rains. This simple act of generosity opened the way for more than 20 grain stores to be built by neighbours in the next two months.

Stones still continue to be turned into bread in Yatta.

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