

Trip report

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Olepolos (Below Ngong hills, south of Nairobi)

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Purpose of the trip

To see rainwater harvesting activities supported by UNEP and RELMA-in-ICRAF within Maasai communities living around Olepolos village in the dry Maasailand on the slopes of the Ngong hills and the plains below.

RELMA and the Olepolos rainwater harvesting project...

In early May when I started preparing the rainwater harvesting project for the lowlands of Kilimanjaro I went to see Malesu Maimbo of RELMA for the first time. He is an experienced Zambian rainwater harvesting expert. He was the one who told me about the rainwater harvesting demonstration site in Makanya, Pare which I consequently visited in May. I visited him again a week ago and he invited me to join the RELMA-UNEP team to Olepolos. In the team were Malesu Maimbo, Elizabeth Khaka of UNEP, Nancy from UNEP, Alex Oduor from RELMA, John Mbugua from Landuse Consultants, Sammy ole Roore from a local CBO)

RELMA has a long history of rainwater harvesting in different countries in Africa. Kusa in western Kenya, in the poorest Luo area of the country, is a well known site of which an interesting and very positive report has just come out. Olepolos is a new site. Activities started only at the beginning of November this year. Groups of the area were exposed to rainwater harvesting and run-off water control and harvesting in Machakos and Nakuru. Group members from Olepolos stayed for three days with the farmers of the other sites seeing all the accomplished work on the ground and exchanging views on how it works.

Total budget of the project is about 90,000 USD, budget for the tank building 20,000 USD. The aim of the project was to build 100 water tanks in two months with half-price support from the project funds, the other half being covered by group savings. In practice about 75% of the price of a tank has been covered by the project, and about 75 tanks will be build before the end of the year. In a way the groups compensate the portion received from the project funds. There are conditions that need to be fulfilled before a tank can be built. Groups work together to fulfil these requirements.

Soil and water conservation...

Before a tank can be built in a homestead, the homestead needs to have a minimum of one hundred holes ready for tree planting (one hundred trees per tank are planted); above the holes a furrow is dug for run-off water collection during rains



(meant for slow seepage during the dry period down the slope towards the trees); in addition, or instead of a furrow, a pond of approximately 5x5 m wide and 6 feet deep can be dug for run-off water collection.

Firewood saving stoves, toilets, table banking...



In addition to the soil and water conservation structures there are other strings attached. One needs to construct a firewood saving stove 'jiko la kuni moja' ('stove of one firewood'). This jiko can hold two pots at a time and it has a little hole for the smoke to come out behind the two 'plates'. A chimney, which is not available for the traditional three-stone model can be attached to the smoke hole. Much less heat escapes from this model compared to the three-stone model. One more requirement is to build a proper long drop toilet. And to make new investments possible, women have started table-banking. The idea is the same as in a merry-go-round group.

Water tanks of 5 cubic metres...



All tanks are built according to one standard. They are ferro-cement tanks of 5 cubic metres. One tank costs about 25,000 KSh. Local fundis are trained on-the-job while building the tanks with the trainers. Each trained fundi receives a certificate stating his skills level - from semi-skilled, skilled to supervisor level.

Women's business...

Water scarcity is one of the most pressing problems in this part of the Maasailand. Cattle is often taken far to drink. Women walk several hours to fetch water for the family, and there is never adequate water at home. And the water quality from rivers and springs is poor. No wonder it is the women who have received the project with open arms. Activities in the project happen in groups, and all of the groups are women-only groups.

I asked why men did not join the groups for rainwater harvesting activities. The answer was clear. It is too difficult to operate in mixed groups. Men always try to dominate women in groups and ruin the common effort. Men are however not outside groups altogether, they do have groups, those of their own, but they are not involved in such practical domestic things like water. They like more highflying things, such as arranging meetings with MPs, I was told. Men had also complained that women keep on repeating themselves, and it irritates men, and makes it difficult for men to work with women. Women simply answered that they do not have any problem with repeating themselves, so, if men have a problem with it, they are free to stay away.

'God's grace is bringing development...'

There was incredible enthusiasm amongst the women. To have water in a homestead is a life-changing experience they couldn't have dreamed of. We visited three locations to which three or four groups had gathered to meet us. We were received with joyful singing and warm hugs. Tea and lunch was offered in the first locations, tea again in the second location and two basinfuls of 'nyama choma' (grilled meat) in the last location. To our embarrassment sofas and armchairs were carried outside under a tree for us, while the women arranged themselves under a tree opposite of us. A lot of speeches were made. These summarised the accomplishments of each group so far, but were also like testimonies typically heard in churches in Kenya... I am saved, I love the Lord... after which repeated proclamations of gratitude followed... the immense grace of God has resulted in the developments that suddenly reached the area in the form of the project. Everybody claps after each proclamation.

These women are so happy and impressed of themselves as well. If one wants to see women's empowerment, this is a place to go to see it. Suddenly these women have found themselves doing things they have never done before, and find they can learn and be good at what they do. They build the tanks themselves, mix the cement and plaster. One old grandmother with all the traditional finery of the Maasai women received a lot of exclamations and clapping due to her accomplishments of getting inside the tanks and plastering the inner surfaces. Many of the fundis are women. There are women at all levels from assistants to supervisors. Considering the Maasai culture this is not surprising as women have traditionally build the dome shaped houses of twisted branches with cow dung-earth plastering on the surface.



Groups...

Groups have developed their own constitutions. I asked what they see as the most important rules that need to be written down in the constitution of the group. Timekeeping, monthly contribution requirement, fines in case one does not follow the rules or does not report in advance if not available for common tasks, rule on voting on who gets the benefit next (table bank collection, tank) were mentioned amongst the most important ones. Thinking about group forming in Kilimanjaro (where groups are not common), I asked for an opinion on how big a group should be in order to have biggest possible saving and labour power at the same time as keeping the group manageable. Twenty was thought as the most optimal size. As 200 Ksh is their typical monthly contribution, each woman gets a sum of 4000 Ksh every twenty months for her investments.

Some lessons for Liana...

One of the things relevant to our proposed project in Kilimanjaro is that rainwater harvesting activities in communal sites should be given to the groups to take care of. If left to the care of for example a school, the activity can get high jacked by an individual, e.g. the head teacher can make it his own business. Another relevant issue to think about is the conditions attached to project funds paying half of the tanks. It increases the level of commitment and ownership at the same time as yielding benefits in the form of environmental conservation.

Leadership in the field...

All field activities are facilitated by a company called Landuse Consultants. They provide the tank-building trainers. The consultant responsible for the efforts in Olepolos is John Mbugua Kiongo, who was also involved in the Makanya project in Tanzania. Another key person in the activities is Sammy ole Roore, the chairman of a CBO in Olepolos and a coordinator of KEPI, Kenya Environmental and Pastoralist Integrated Development Initiative.

Ric and I organised to meet with Sammy on Saturday the 17th and spent six hours with him and another member of KEPI, Paul Kilelu, in Olepolos looking at how KEPI and Liana could do something together in the Maasailand. But that's another story...