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## COMMENTARY

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### WHY GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT WORKS

Christie Peacock

01 November 2004



United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan speaks of the urgent need for a Green Revolution in Africa and urges governments, North and South, to "recognise that agriculture is an essential pillar of development". The World Bank acknowledges the link between agricultural growth and poverty reduction. Yet international aid for African agriculture fell by almost half in the last decade of the 20th century.

Clearly, rhetoric and reality are out of synch. And it could get worse – will get worse, unless action is taken now. The World Bank forecasts that Africa and the Middle East are two regions of the world where, on present trends, the number of "absolute poor" living on less than a dollar a day, will actually rise between now and 2015, from 315 million to 404 million.

Fortunately, the solution to this unacceptable situation is staring us in the face: help those in need to help themselves and their countries – not by unsustainable "safety net" welfare support, costing billions nor by unproductive food aid. Instead, the focus should be on small-scale farmers, who have the potential to generate and sustain economic growth and employment.

Half the population of sub-Saharan Africa live in poverty and two-thirds of these people are eking out a living in the rural areas. So it makes sense to direct support to where it is needed and where it can bring results.

I have spent 24 years working in Africa and South-East Asia. I started off in Kenya doing research with the Maasai and had a period of research and teaching in Indonesia and Thailand. I was always working for big international organisations and became frustrated at how few resources from the aid business actually reached the poor. That was why I jumped at the chance of working in Ethiopia running a grassroots development project for FARM-Africa.

FARM-Africa, is an international NGO, and we have been working with poor rural farmers and herders in Africa since 1985 aiming to reduce poverty by providing innovative approaches to natural resource management and enabling people to produce more food for their families and have some left over to sell.

From our own work, FARM-Africa knows that such support can bring results. So does farmer Haile Yeshe, who lives in Bonga state forest in Kaffa – home of coffee – in south-western Ethiopia. He comes

from the Manja community who are living off the forest, currently vanishing at a rate of 200,000 hectares a year across the country.

Haile Yesho was forced off his land under the previous communist government and made to live in crowded conditions. When villagers were finally allowed back – they discovered the previous government had taken their land and planted over it with trees. Forced into forest clearings, FARM-Africa helped them to start again, providing training, helping them to work out their forest management plan, and devise a sustainable future for themselves. With a little training and good rainfall, Yesho has prospered.

Yesho may be a smallholder farmer but his activities are increasing. That's another reason for focusing on smallholders. His new activities provide work and trade not just for his family but for others in his village too. The spill-over benefits are considerable. In Kenya, smallholder farming generates 29 per cent of gross national product directly and a further 30 per cent indirectly through related activities, such as processing and wages to labourers.

Through my work, I have seen what can be done to transform the lives of some of the poorest people in the world when resources are well targeted and used. However smallholder agriculture has dropped off the agenda of most aid donors and very few resources are allocated to supporting farmers to develop their farms, which is why we are pressing for action on several fronts. Yes, northern governments must instruct their negotiators at the World Trade Organization not to seek decisions that disadvantage African agriculture: equally, government departments of international development and aid agencies need to increase investment in agriculture; cooperate with NGOs to encourage farmer-led initiatives and strengthen the voice of smallholder farmers and herders; working with African agriculture ministries to engage ministries of finance to make the case for investment in smallholder agriculture.

The problems to be overcome are great, ranging from poor soil and erratic rainfall to the impact of HIV/AIDS, from drought to deteriorating roads, from inefficient agriculture ministries to weak farmers' organisations. But if national governments and the international community do not address the constraints facing African agriculture, the prospects for the continent's poor will remain bleak. I have seen for myself what is possible which is why I believe Africa's poor deserve better.

I am driven to do this work by a passionate belief that the sort of degrading poverty I have seen in places like Ethiopia should simply not exist in the 21st century. It is possible to get rid of it. It is not easy but what keeps me going is the knowledge, from my own life and experience, that it is possible to improve the lives of people even in the most difficult circumstances. I have done it and therefore I know it is possible. It is vitally important that we all play the part we can.

*Dr Christie Peacock is Chief Executive Officer of Farm-Africa. An animal scientist, she has worked in applied research on traditional livestock systems in Africa and South East Asia, specialising in goat production. She was a speaker at the 2004 Caux Conference for Business and Industry.*

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