



FIGHTING FOR FOOD SECURITY: THE WOLLO COMMUNITY SEED BANK



Imagine growing up in the village of Ergeset.

Here in the northern highlands of Ethiopia the rain comes less often than it used to. As you walk the fields with your father you know he is worried. It hasn't rained in 40 days. The land is parched, and when you reach down to feel the soil it crumbles through your fingers. The sorghum and millet plants look thin and weak and you know what your father is thinking: once again, this year's harvest may not provide enough food to feed the family.

In some years, the harvest has been so small that all the grain had to be used for eating and none could be saved as seed for planting in the following year. Your mother had to walk for two days to your cousin's village in the valley looking for seed for planting.

But the seed from the valley region had not done well in your family's fields where the earth and climate is different. There was a very small harvest of grain. It even tasted strange! The seed from the valley was better suited to the soils of the valley.

Last year, the meals your mother cooked were small and on many days you had gone hungry. And because there had been no extra grain to sell at the local market, there was no money to pay for school fees so you and your sister were not able to go to school.

But things may be better soon. Here in your village in the Wollo highlands of Ethiopia, there is a plan to build a community seed bank.

What is a Community Seed Bank?

A community seed bank is a building where farmers can store all kinds of seed varieties from many different foods grown by local farmers. These seeds are readily available when droughts or other disasters affect the quality and quantity of the annual harvest.

Imagine that in the good years, before the droughts, your parents and other families in the village had a place to put aside samples from the family seed stock. Seeds can be stored for years and years in the right conditions. In bad years, the kind that Wollo is experiencing right



now, rather than traveling for days to find seeds from outside your community, your parents could go to the community seed bank and pick up a bag of good seed that is well-adjusted to their fields, the local ecosystem and also your family's tastes!

The seed bank, like a savings account, would be there to get your family and your village through the bad times, giving you a choice of good seeds to draw from.

How will the Wollo Community Seed Bank work?

The Wollo Community Seed Bank will store seeds for community of villages. It will also be a meeting place where farmers can share their observations and knowledge and learn to cope with new challenges.

A few years ago, when an insect was destroying Ethiopian crops, some regional farmers and Ethiopian scientists noted a field of crops that the insects avoided. There was something in these plants these pests didn't like. Farmers teamed up with scientists to take seed samples from this field. They tested and multiplied the seeds, and then used them and distributed them to their neighbours. The new crops grown from this seed could withstand the insect infestation, and their food supply was restored.



As a meeting centre, the seed bank provides a place farmers can gather to solve problems, share strategies, take part in training sessions and start a library with books about plants, animals, and nutrition for everyone in the community to use.

A community seed bank is also like a museum, a place to conserve valuable parts of a community's history and identity. The kinds of food we eat are part of our heritage that we celebrate during festivals and rituals, and the seed bank helps us keep the genetic resources needed for these celebrations.

Why Wollo? Why now?

While many countries have central seed banks run by government agencies, local community seed banks that farmers can access are rare. And while local farmers have always kept their own family seed stock, few communities have a back-up storage system as insurance against hard times. The Wollo Community Seed Bank will also be a model for other organizations around the world. Farmers' groups will visit it for training, and to learn how to build their own community seed banks.



When communities in the Harbu subdistrict of Wollo province heard about seed banks, they approached an Ethiopian NGO, Ethio-Organic Seed Action (EOSA), to ask for help to build one. EOSA is an Ethiopian organization that works in rural areas to provide training in sustainable agriculture, develop community seed storage and distribution systems, and breed and multiply plant varieties with small-scale farmers.

EOSA is a part of the Seeds of Survival network, a network of non-governmental organizations that are supporting ecological agriculture practice and strategies that build strong, resilient communities. The SoS network is coordinated by USC Canada, a Canadian non-governmental organization based in Ottawa. USC was founded in 1945 and promotes vibrant family farms, strong rural communities, and healthy ecosystems around the world.

The seeds of generosity

At a workshop on December 22, 2007 in Kombolcha village in Wollo, a farmer named Jammal offered to donate land for a community seed bank in the village of Ergeset, inside the Harbu subdistrict of Wollo province. Jammal is a long time participant in the Seeds of Survival program who wanted to help others like the SoS program helped him.

This land (shown below) is 987 square metres, 4 km from the main road in Ergeset. The villagers of Ergeset have agreed that the land should be re-zoned and dedicated to the construction of the seed bank.



This year, USC is partnering with Two Villages, a Newfoundland not-for-profit organization, to raise funds to build the Wollo Community Seed Bank. A major donor has also raised funds for the project through donations for her husband's birthday, and we're still looking for donations to pay the rest of the costs for the seed bank. We've only raised half of the costs, so we really need your help to make this happen.

Where is Wollo?

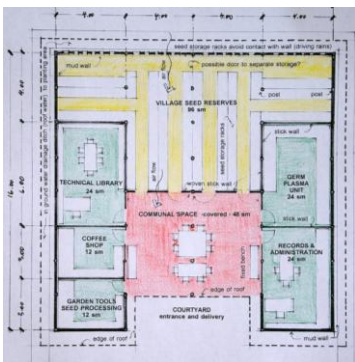


Ethiopia's northern Wollo province is probably best known by the rest of the world for the devastating famine that killed more than one million people there in 1984/5. The Live Aid concerts, held by Bob Geldorf, raised money to help ship food aid to help people then. But that tragic famine also inspired the creation of the Seeds of Survival (SoS) program, which has since spread to ten other countries.

Ethiopia is a global centre of unique biodiversity spreading across its flat plains, high mountains, and hundreds of different micro-environments. The country has long been recognized as one of the world's most important centers of agricultural biodiversity with a rich variety of plants, flowers, animals and soils. It's also a centre of origin for much of our food: barley, for example, was born there.

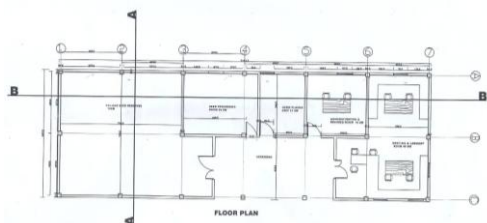
Ethiopia is also home to one of the most ancient cultures in the world. The planet's earliest humans originated in Ethiopia and travelled across it as they moved to Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Today, it's the second most populated country in Sub-Saharan Africa.

How is the Seed Bank being made?



The community of Ergeset will pay the wages of the young people who will help in the construction, and other key expenses. The local government may participate through a food for work program, through which villagers would pave the four kilometer road to the seed bank.

A Canadian architect (the man whose birthday donations raised money for the seed bank) was visiting Wollo back in December 2007 because he was interested in USC programs. When he was there, he put together a rough blueprint for the seed bank complex (see right). There would be a space for the storage of the village's seed reserves; a place for breeding new varieties; a library; a records and administration office; a coffee shop; a shed for processing seed and garden tool storage; a demonstration garden; and a meeting place for social interaction, visual presentations and training, where youth meet elders, farmers meet farmers, and social workers meet the community. The key design goals were use as little land as possible, ensure local building materials could be used, and make the building process cost efficient.



from local soils. The revised floor plan that they've developed is shown on the left.

Since then, young Ethiopian architects from Addis Ababa, the capital city, have volunteered their time to make a few adjustments to customize the design to the land that's been allocated and to incorporate the use of low-cost materials in the meeting space. In the construction phase, they plan to volunteer their time on-site. They will teach farmers how to construct better houses using local materials and provide training in making bricks

When will the Wollo Community Seed Bank be built?

The Wollo Community Seed Bank is in the last stages of planning. Construction is starting at the end of October 2008. The idea is to establish a system that, in time, will support itself through a revolving fund and payments for services provided. An opening ceremony is planned for December 2008. It is expected to support more than 1000 households in the region through seeds, learning, support, storage and tools for self-sufficient, high-yielding, resilient and diverse farming.



How can we make it happen?

Fundraising for the Wollo Community Seed Bank is a direct, real way to build food security and reduce hunger for Africans. Take action in your community to make sure more than 4,000 people have food for the future!

Wollo Community Seed Bank Budget

Item	Description	Item Total
A	Foundation	
1	Excavation and earth work	3,544.31
2	Concrete work	8,444.35
3	Masonry Work	2,503.78
B	Building	
1	Concrete Work	5,618.08
2	Mud Wall	1,794.31
3	Roofing	5,007.78
4	Carpentry & Joinery	1,628.62
5	Metal work	2,466.67
6	Glazing	389.33
7	Finishing	3,834.49
Total		\$35,231.71

Two Villages hopes to raise seventeen thousand five hundred dollars which, along with donations from other concerned Canadians and the support of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), will make the Wollo Community Seed Bank a reality.