

Project promotes food security in Ethiopia

Editor's note: This is the third part of a series on the food crisis in the Horn of Africa. DJ Clark toured an agricultural center in Ethiopia sponsored by the Chinese government.

By DJ CLARK
FOR CHINA DAILY

ADDIS ABABA, Ethiopia — Zhao Peili is young, attractive and very different from the Chinese chief engineer I had imagined I would meet as I drove the 85 kilometers out of Addis Ababa, through rolling farmland, to the new Ethiopia-China Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center.

Wearing a red builder's helmet, Zhao began the tour by showing a picture of a small wooden shack. "That was my home when I first moved here two years ago. I had no power or water, we had to start from scratch."

Walking around just a fraction of the area being developed into the new center, I was shown multiple plots of land with Chinese and local workers busily working on rising structures.

As part of a drive initiated by China's Ministry of Commerce to help improve livelihoods in Africa, 142 agricultural projects have been set up across the continent, including 14 specialized agricultural technology demonstration centers. At the China-Africa Summit in 2006, when the announcement of the support was first made, the transfer of Chinese agricultural technology to local African partners, as a means to improve food security, was cited as the key reason for building the projects.

"When you talk about agricultural development in general it is all about maintaining food security. Food security cannot be attained

Video

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without the building of assets, without income generation and without having prospects at household level and this is our target," Edmealem Shitaye, deputy director of Agricultural Extension at the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture, explained when asked why the demonstration center was requested. "We cannot adopt technologies from the UK or US or other developed Western countries. We find it more appropriate to look east to India and China and other Asian countries who are closer to the African context."

In February the Guangxi International Construction Engineering Company will hand over the new research and teaching facility to the Guangxi Bagui Agricultural Science and Technology Company, which has been tasked with running the center for its first three years. It will then be donated to the Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture as a gesture of goodwill from the Chinese government.

"This project has three functions," said Liang Gaosheng, senior agronomist from the Bagui group. "The first is to conduct research under the local conditions to ensure what works in China also is effective here. The second is to train local technicians. In three years we hope to have worked with at least 500 local agricultural professionals, and the third is to ensure when we hand over the center the local partners have the capacity to continue running it successfully."

Liang, who has already been in Ethiopia for more than two years, is optimistic about the potential of increasing yields in the country. "The weather here is very good, and there is



a rich variety of plant species growing at altitudes from 4,000 meters down to sea level."

He is however cautious about the challenge ahead. "The hard part is going to be teaching the local farmers who are very much stuck in traditional means of production."

A key issue now being discussed between the Chinese and Ethiopian scientists is whether to concentrate the research just on cereal crops or to also look to cash crops as a means of economic development. While Liang is focused on boosting staple food productivity in the short term, Shitaye believes the long-term plan has to be broader. "Everything is related. When you talk about transfer of technology, it's all about food security.

When you talk about income generation, it's all about food security. So promotion of agricultural interventions is all about food security at the household, regional and national levels."

Gu Xiaojie, Chinese ambassador to Ethiopia, is extremely enthusiastic about the project particularly given the recent drought across the Horn of Africa. Gu said he believes the project is very timely and demonstrates a long-term commitment to food security in the area that is just as important as the emergency aid now arriving from China in Ethiopia. "We have a goal to impart China's advances in agricultural technology to areas in Ethiopia where food security has been a long-term issue," he said. "This

includes managing the land as well as bettering irrigation and seed varieties. We are bringing over 300 experts to work at the demonstration center and at the same time funding scholarships for agricultural students from Ethiopia to study in China."

As I was about to leave the agricultural center, Zhao was called over to sort out a crane that had become stuck in the thick mud around the site. Without thinking she transitioned from an articulate soft voiced tour guide to an authoritative, confident building manager, giving instructions to both Chinese and Ethiopian workers. Within a minute the problem was resolved and work resumed as usual. Next February she plans to return to



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Top: Local farmers working their fields in Ginci, Ethiopia. Above: Chinese and Ethiopian workers at the Ethiopia-China Agricultural Technology Demonstration Center in Ginci, Ethiopia.

China in the belief that she has done something important for the people of Ethiopia.

"This project is a gift from China to Ethiopia and demonstrates our friendship. I am

hopeful it will make Ethiopia a better place. I have made a lot of friends here and although it has been tough at times, I am proud of what I have achieved."

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