

Launching a land recovery process in Telecho Kabele

SUNDAY

Arriving in Telecho:

We arrived in bus and car, climbing steeply to about 2,600 metres. There were sweeping views of rolling landscapes in all directions. As we came over the brow of a hill, a covey of horsemen appeared and perked our interest. Perhaps there was a local celebration today, we wondered. They stopped close enough for us to see their beautifully embroidered saddle blankets. When they raised their long sticks in greeting we suddenly realised they were there for us. They then turned round to lead us into their community, ceremoniously chanting as they cantered ahead.



This set the tone for an in-depth experience between representatives of the Telecho community and a number of NGO and Government community workers. For four nights and three days this group of about 40 people shared stories of the past, of today and of how it could be in the future.

The day before fasting began:

Soon after arriving we had lunch, which included lots of meat - this being the last day before the Lent fast began, during which time many Orthodox Christians don't eat any animal products at all. After lunch, the Chief District Officer Ato Berehanu, who had travelled up with us, welcomed us to the area and gave his official blessing to the gathering. He then took his leave and left us to introduce ourselves.



A first taste:

In their introductions the Telecho community members began to give us an idea of how the land has degraded over the last few decades. "We used to eat from the forest. With the Derg regime came massive cutting down of forests," said Zewde Bedada in his introduction. Abebe Lemma went on to say: "We have come here to regain the land, not for our children, but for the future generations."

"There used to be many wild fruits and animals. Let's work together to rehabilitate our land," urged Gadisa Hunde. There seemed to be a determination in the air that I continued to sense throughout our time in Telecho. This gathering was about galvanising a community to action. But before action there needed to be discussion and understanding.



The visitors, too, introduced themselves. There was Alameyehu, Indris, and Bayissa from the Institute of Sustainable Development (ISD), Shimeles, Million, Keria and

Tesfaye from Melca, Gebre from Ethioscop, Urge and Martha from the Ministry of Agriculture, Mehari from a nearby research station, Elsa, a farmer from Wollo in the north of the country, and myself, from Zimbabwe and visiting to Ethiopia for the first time.

How should we behave?

The Telecho members wanted to have a short meeting and we, the visitors, used the time to discuss our roles and the 'do's and don'ts' for our stay in Telecho. We were all allocated families to stay with. This was part of building the relationship with the community. "It's very critical that we listen," stressed Bayissa. "We are here to learn." One person was a little puzzled by us staying in the community. "Is this Melca's style?" he asked. We all agreed that the focus of our discussions with families would be on seed, though the exercises during the day would go way beyond this.

The dark was creeping in over the hills and a number of us were impatient to see where we would be staying. Equipped with airbeds and bedding we radiated off to our respective homes. Million and I followed our host, Mulugeta Taffa, to his family homestead, a maze of buildings and animal shelters, mostly thatched mud and pole houses but also the odd tin-roofed one. Mulugeta is the 'Village Manager'. We were made thoroughly welcome, and drank and ate to more than our heart's content. And we talked about the Taffa family's lives in Telecho, focusing in on seed whenever it felt appropriate. Outside in a shelter near our room the cattle steamed, shadow members of the Taffa family, intricately bound to their well-being.

Slightly mellow with Arake, the local drink, which also helps digestion greatly, we blew up our airbeds while Mulugeta and Abaynesh took their leave. Our first impression was of a tough and fruitful life, still held together by a cultural bond with the land.

MONDAY

"The family we are staying with has cattle, sheep and horses. They have one tinned roof house, which they keep for guests and status, preferring to stay in their thatched house. They have seed potatoes and this is a good cash crop for them. They have four varieties of wheat and three varieties of barley, the black, the white and the 'lazy' variety. They also make njera from wheat, with one variety being suitable for this." Gebre began the sharing of experiences first thing after breakfast on Monday morning. In fact we had two breakfasts, the first at the Taffa home was crushed wheat and ghee (clarified butter), known as Quinte, with two cups of very strong coffee.

"Round their house is a well constructed Juniper fence. When we asked them why they had cut the Juniper they said they had seen others cutting it to sell and so thought they should make use of it. Juniper fences are very durable and last for a long time," continued Gebre.

The mapping begins:

While we were sharing our evening experiences, 20 Telecho residents were working on a mapping exercise. Melca had prepared a number of large base maps of about 2 metres by 3 metres. These maps showed the boundary of Telecho, roads and

pathways, and rivers and streamlines. The first task of the Telecho community members was to identify and place our present location and other main locations on the map and then to illustrate what it was like 30-40 years ago.

There was lots of discussion. The younger members took the lead at first, perhaps more at ease with a map, while the older members listened and looked, their faces intent with concentration. But they too then joined in. There was no rush. This was an important exercise and needed time. Now and again one of the Melca staff would pop over and see if there were any queries about the process. The aim was not to interfere but rather let them get on with it. In the start-up, one of the Government officials amongst us had wanted to give his input about locations. When he persisted, someone gently eased him away.



First learning about seed in Telecho:

Meanwhile, we continued to share our first experiences from the families we were staying with. Sue and Quincey of ISD had joined us by then from Addis. Katama, the head of Agriculture and Forestry in the Woreda, had also walked in early that morning to be with us. Some of the points that came out that first day were:

- There is lots of seed exchange amongst farmers in Telecho. If someone has a seed that others don't have then you must loan or give it or sell it at a reasonable price to others who don't have it.
- The major crop is durum wheat followed by barley and pulses
- The Bonde wheat variety is tall, with a big head and resists dry spells and diseases well.
- The men till the land while the women weed, harvest and transport crops to the home, where the men prepare the place for winnowing.
- Improved varieties generally give a good harvest the first year and then they 'tire' quickly
- 'People here are not as poor as we say they are. They have good houses and they eat well.'
- Each family has a plan which feeds into the village plan, then in turn into the Kabale plan and so on. (There was some discussion about this and whether it is as bottom-up as it sounds.)

Many of these points kept coming up again and again, particularly the one about improved seed varieties 'getting tired quickly.'

By now the community map was coming alive. Many people were participating, drawing and colouring where there had been forests, perennial rivers and wild animals. It was obviously a hard experience for them, particularly the older people who recalled how much healthier the land was then. The younger people were learning all the time.



The morning slipped by and it was soon time for lunch, during which people kept talking and sharing. Though it was a 'workshop', it didn't really feel like

one. It felt more real. There was an unfolding that wasn't restricted by a specific programme. The mapping was taking as long as it needed. How could one restrict such a key exercise with a programme?

The visitors share their seed stories amongst themselves:

In the afternoon the visitors' meeting turned to personal experiences with seed, bringing out story after story.

***Elsa's* seed story:**

I am the leader of a local women's group and local seed conservation group. As a child I walked 15 km to school everyday without shoes. My father would not buy me shoes because there were so many siblings. I remember how I didn't have a bag for my exercise books, and teachers would beat me if my books were dirty. There was a time when I felt very resentful and didn't speak with my parents for four years. However now I am reunited with my family. I have a ten-year-old son, a car and a grinding mill and I'm very busy!



My family began to lose their seed with the coming of the Derg, who put emphasis on improved varieties and then in the 1984 drought many farmers lost traditional seed varieties. Farmers in our area quickly grew impatient with improved varieties. True, they were good at first but the yield went down in the following years. Fortunately there were elders and women who stored some of the traditional varieties in a safe place. Some of these elders treated the seed like their children, constructing special seed storages.

We are now spreading these traditional varieties, which have many advantages over the improved varieties: for example, they last longer in the house, they make heavier, fuller bread, they don't require artificial fertilisers and grow well with applications of compost, they fetch a higher price at the market (12 birr for a kg compared to 6 birr for improved varieties), they don't have to be harvested quickly like the improved varieties, they are easier to digest, cattle much prefer their husks to the husks of improved varieties...the list goes on and on.

***Endris's* story:**

I want to start off by telling you about my grandfather, who is now 115 years old and who has often shared seed stories with me. For maize he selects large cobs for seed that haven't been attacked by birds or insects and hangs these cobs in the roof of the house where smoke will protect them until the next season. With teff he selects the taller plants for seed, what he calls 'the mothers'. These are threshed separately and then stored with husks in a gourd. He also mixes teff seed with wheat seed to help preserve the wheat since insects don't attack the teff.

I agree with what Elsa says about how traditional varieties have been lost, with the improved varieties taking their place in the 1980s. The 1984 drought was particularly bad for the loss of traditional seed. In our area Farmers' Associations are helping to bring back traditional varieties. I also agree with the advantages she mentions for traditional varieties, particularly their husks being good for animals.

In 1995 I set up an experiment. In one plot of land I planted improved varieties, and on a different plot I planted traditional varieties. I kept all variables the same except that I planted the traditional varieties one week later than the improved varieties. The improved variety yielded 40 quintals, whereas the traditional variety yielded 49 quintals.

I remember one occasion where we asked farmers to plant teff and they refused because they said the land was not good for teff. One 90 year-old elder was particularly strong in his warning. In the end, with more persuasion, the farmers tried teff on part of the land; and it failed!

Keria:

I worked as a Development Agent after school for the Ministry of Agriculture and I was meant to push DAP fertilisers but I resisted this as the soils were already acidic and the DAP worsened this. My father advised me to listen to the farmers more than anything. On one occasion I didn't do this when I tried to persuade a farmer to plant an improved wheat variety. He said that if he did so on all his field and it failed he and his family would starve. So he tried it on half his field. It failed but at least he still had enough food.

I remember how the Sassekawa Global's maize was very productive in the first year but a disaster in the second year.

In my area there are 80 varieties of Inset.

Tesfaye told us of the wonderful smell of black wheat being baked in the house, and the taste to go with it. Since eating traditional varieties of teff and barley, grown without fertiliser, his problems of gastritis have gone. He reminded us that the flowering time for improved varieties is less than that of traditional varieties and this affects honey production. Tesfaye has been collecting varieties of barley and the local knowledge that goes with it that are resistant to the disease "fly-shoot". His home is at an altitude above 3,500 metres and this disease is not present there. He has collected 16 varieties so far, all varieties that have been lost in many places.

Katama remembers having to force farmers to grow improved varieties of maize after the 1994/5 drought. At first they harvested 120 quintals per hectare but three years later it was down to 35 quintals. "We had to threaten people that if they didn't use chemical fertiliser they would lose their land. Farmers don't want to stop using traditional varieties, because of the unreliability of improved varieties. Nowadays as Government, although we push improved varieties, we also encourage farmers to keep their traditional varieties." The Government sees the improved varieties, along with use of fertilisers and pesticides, as necessary to feed the growing population. Katama felt that there is a strong need for more open conversation between government agents and farmers.

Mahari's current focus is forestry but he knows a lot about seed. He has seen how farmers have rejected improved maize and potato varieties for various reasons. He described how improved varieties go through a lot of testing both at research institutions and on-farm but "most of the tested improved varieties are on the shelf; only about 10% have gone out". Unfortunately the Research Institutions shifted to

importing technologies and varieties from elsewhere to get quicker results. However, recent signs are that the emphasis will return to generating research in Ethiopia.

Returning to the maps:

“ I felt very sad doing the maps because we can see how our land was and how it is now. But I also felt happy because I know what we have to do now.”

“Before there was forest. Now there is bare land. In the first map there was a lot of water with the rivers flowing all year. Now the rivers are drying and we have a lot of gullies and erosion.”

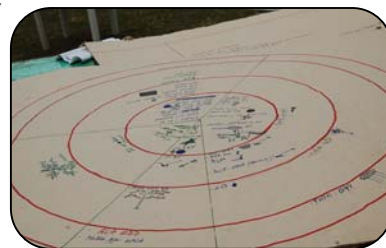
The Telecho members were expressing their feelings to everyone after a full day producing two colourful maps, but with one of the maps not having such a colourful story. This was the map of today, showing the widespread degradation that has taken place. They say that if we want to deal with issues we have to confront them first. I admired the way in which these Telecho community representatives were confronting the issues of the health of their land. I think we all ended this day with mixed feelings: sadness and hope.



Another evening with the Taffa family; now there were four of us staying there as Sue and Quincey had joined us. We had chunks of durum wheat bread, tasty and full, as bread should be. I thought about my last trip to the UK, the ‘developed’ world, where much of the bread is fluffy and completely tasteless. ‘Does losing one’s taste buds go with ‘development’?’ I wondered as I was falling asleep that night.

TUESDAY:

In the morning, on the way to the meeting, we stopped to help with the winnowing and realised that we were more of a hindrance than a help. There is a very wide set of skills that goes with growing and processing your own food, passed from generation to generation. I again recalled my last trip to the UK where the Transition movement are talking about how important it is that people in industrialised countries revive this set of skills as the fossil energy pinch will see the need for a renewal of local food production. Many of those who are part of the Transition movement or something like it are becoming aware of how badly they lack basic skills, though they may be well educated in a formal sense. I wondered if people living in communities like here in Telecho are fully aware just how knowledgeable and skilled they are.



Melca staff introduced the Telecho representatives to their next exercises for the day, which would be to:

- Draw a map to illustrate which crops are grown where in the varied topography of Telecho
- Produce an ecological calendar, and

- Do a timeline from early in the 20th century illustrating the coming and going of different seed varieties, in other words Telecho's seed story.

They would also keep adding more detail to the two maps they worked on the previous day.

Women's group meeting:

Everyone realised that one of the weaknesses of the meeting so far is the lack of participation by women. Elsa agreed to lead a meeting with women and within a couple of hours there was a circle of about 20 women discussing seed issues with Elsa. There were now three different activities taking place, separate but entwined with each other as part of an unfolding story, which was only beginning with this three-day meeting. Some of the points that came out of the women's group meeting were:



- We used to plant traditional varieties with manure, now we also use compost.
- The improved varieties need more inputs such as fertiliser and we have to leave the land fallow. Also we can only use them for one year otherwise production goes down a lot. And these varieties take more baking time.
- We can keep planting local varieties on the same plot of land.
- The new generation of children needs more clothes and protection from cold and rain, and we think this may be due to them eating improved varieties.
- An old lady who eats traditional varieties is very healthy. Her children who eat improved varieties easily become sick.

Visitors continue to reflect and discuss:

We visitors gathered to continue our discussions and reflection. Shimeles let us know that some people couldn't come today because of a Kabele meeting and that there is a worry about getting the harvest in because of the early rain that is around.

Alex shared how the family he is staying with are only left with two varieties of seed. The women are angry about this and the men hadn't realised the extent of their loss. I shared my perception that, while there are a lot of skills and knowledge in this community, there also seems to be serious erosion taking place: erosion of skills, of knowledge, of confidence, of seed and of soil. There is also a lot of potential. It is a relatively good climate and generally people are producing enough food. This is not a desperate situation. But the worry about erosion is that it starts slowly, and gets faster and faster. The whole community must manage the whole watershed, which will only happen gradually. It's a long-term relationship that is needed here with motivation and a strong cultural sense.

I also shared my experience in Zimbabwe where Chikukwa ward in the east of the country took quite a long time until they were managing the watershed as a community, but then this one Ward began to serve as a model for other Wards. Now there is a very active programme across the district that grew out of the work in Chikukwa ward.

Gebre stressed the notion that the community needs support, the right kind of support. They want to save their traditional varieties of seed and they want to restore their land

to health. For both of these activities they will need support. Million assured everyone that Melca is here to give support for as long as is needed. And Sue said that ISD is keen to work with them. She also suggested an exchange visit to communities in Tigray with whom ISD has been working for a number of years. Katama said that the Government is fully committed to water conservation activities, as the situation is very serious. They are looking at whole watersheds and welcome the help of NGOs in this work.

Taking a walk:

I then took a long walk to the surrounding areas. Nearby is a grove of mostly Juniper trees, including some magnificent specimens that must be hundreds of years old. This grove is trying to protect a watercourse but the signs of erosion are everywhere, small landslides and the beginnings of gullies. I then walked on through fields and noticed the beginnings of serious erosion there too. The soil is on the move. Between the fields the grass cover is not too bad, obviously helped by a quite good distribution of moisture throughout the year and the cool temperatures. All the grass plants show signs of overgrazing, especially in the areas near homes. Everyone here herds their animals all year, which gives a good potential for making the step to bigger community herds that the land so badly needs.



Earlier today Sue spoke of how 30 years ago the main issues were water and management of livestock. Today these two issues remain critical and they are of course interlinked. The Telecho residents have raised a number of times the fact that getting water is becoming more and more difficult. As one walks around it is very clear why this is the case.

Dr. Melaku:

We were very privileged to have Dr. Melaku with us for Tuesday afternoon. He has extensive experience with issues around seed in Ethiopia and in many other parts of Africa where he has visited. He has a global reputation for the work he has done to save Ethiopia's incredible genetic diversity. In his introduction some of his points were:

- ❖ I'm very pleased when I see people like Elsa leading a discussion with other women on seed. This is how it should be, farmers talking to farmers and it's especially important that women's roles are properly recognised. Farmers are the people that know reality.
- ❖ It's also very special for me to see organizations like Melca and ISD working together like this with farmers. There's generally not enough collaboration going on between organizations.
- ❖ We must remember that Ethiopia is a centre of biodiversity in the world. In my PhD work I looked at lysine in 4,000 varieties of wheat from around the world and three out of the four varieties with the highest amount were from Ethiopia.
- ❖ We must also recall how biodiversity in agriculture has come about: farmers have always been 'negotiating' with weeds. By domesticating wild plants they have brought many crops into farming. The seed of

crops that we see now have adapted to the ecosystem even if production is sometimes low. As scientists we mustn't lose sight of this in our drive to increase production.

- ❖ Climate change is now a challenge. In between the forest and the farmland are weeds, which are adapting to climate change all the time. Some of these weeds may be our future crops. They are a critical part of the biodiversity that will ensure our future. We have to keep relating the ecosystems of the forest, the farmland and the bits in between where the 'weeds' grow. If we don't lose these weeds then in 150-200 years one of them may become a new crop for us.
- ❖ The knowledge of farmers' is a key part of the biodiversity. Without this knowledge it's like trying to clap with one hand. We need to be thinking about developing community knowledge libraries. This should include capturing older people's knowledge on DVD recordings. And this is why these mapping exercises are so important, they enable the sharing of knowledge between generations. During the time of the Derg I was collecting seed varieties and on one occasion was amazed at the way in which a small child was able to tell the difference between all the varieties his family were growing.
- ❖ One theme that I want to emphasise is that of combining 'western' knowledge with traditional knowledge *on an equal basis*. Part of this means offering farmers alternatives so that they can decide for themselves: let them decide, for example, whether they want to use fertiliser or compost.
- ❖ Traditional varieties are much more complex than improved varieties and have plasticity - they are not uniform and grow across a variety of environmental conditions.

Dr. Melaku described how years ago improved varieties of wheat came in from Mexico and they held trials to compare these with local varieties. The trouble was that behind the trials were the companies who were wanting to promote their crops. Farmers have not developed traditional varieties with the DAP fertiliser that was used in the trials and which improved varieties depend on. And once farmers start using these chemical fertilisers it is difficult to return to the complexity of local varieties, which are in fact cultivars.



It is possible to bring in some level of uniformity without compromising diversity. This is the case with some of the elite composites that are being developed.

Mahari asked whether Ethiopia can feed itself using traditional varieties given the increasing population. In his response Dr. Melaku emphasised the need to use both improved varieties and traditional varieties and to be looking to sustainability all the time, not short term increases in production. Also, scientists must work more with farmers, whose selection criteria are much broader than scientists who tend only to look at production. Farmers also consider things like storage, taste, processing and so on. Sue gave an example from the Philippines where farmers are breeding their own rice varieties, working with scientists.

First presentation of maps:

Before Dr. Melaku left the community members presented their maps to him:

The map of the past: The grass was tall and beautiful. There were many varieties of trees in the forests and there were wild animals such as antelopes, lions, leopards and many different types of birds.

The map of today: The land is degraded and there are many gullies. The farmland is very bad, and though the grass is green, it is not good grass. There are no wild animals anymore. Forests have disappeared, replaced by plantations of Eucalyptus. The abundance of Junipers is no longer there.



They also presented the timeline, ecological calendar and cropping map that they had by now completed.

WEDNESDAY:

The main task for the Telecho community representatives on this third day was to draw a map of how they would like things in the future to be, as well as finishing off their other maps. Melca and ISD staff used opportunities in between to trace the community maps so as to have a record to take away with them, leaving the originals with the community.

Visitor group meeting reflections:

First on seed:

There is lots of careful thought that goes into which seeds to plant when. For example, as Elsa explained, if the short rains are adequate then farmers will go for one set of crops. If the rain is inadequate then they will plant another set. She also said that she breaks new ground by growing fava beans and then follows this with Teff. Endris emphasised the point that farmers decide which seed to grow depending on what weather conditions there have been. They also look to what trees do; for example, if the Doho tree fruits then it is a sign that Teff will 'fruit' well. There can be up to 20 seed varieties to choose from.

There is also the issue, pointed out by Sue, that some crops need dormancy. Teff and garlic, for example, benefit from at least one year's rest.

Knowledgeable seed farmers select their seeds in the field and they process them separately from what they eat. Gebre recounted a difference in the family he was staying with, where the husband said he preferred an improved variety because of its higher yield whereas his wife said she preferred their Kumsa variety because it was good for cooking with. In the end the husband came to agree with her, saying he hadn't realised this. Gebre stressed that the way forward is to work on improving traditional varieties such as Kumsa. One of the problems is that the emerging food industry requires uniformity. Households can change their technology but industry can't. It appears that in Telecho, most people grow the improved varieties to sell and the traditional varieties to eat.

On the mapping exercises:

Gebre worried that there had been a gap between the community members and the visitors while the mapping was going on. Mahari noted how he had seen the farmers struggling with the map at first, having disagreements about different locations on the map. But in time they came to a consensus. 'The process has helped them to look at their history and to see how their land has degraded. They are feeling as if they have suffered a great loss.' Alex also felt that the mapping had been a very powerful exercise, enabling the community members and other stakeholders to understand what is happening. He worried, though, whether, he has the capacity to undertake a similar exercise with another community.

Bayessa had the same concern, while also appreciating the way in which, in a relatively short time, the community have captured and shared a lot of knowledge about their changing environment. Endris and Tesfaye recognised that participation in these kinds of processes is crucial and that building participation takes time. This mapping exercise had made a good start in doing this. Tesfaye felt that this method is simpler and cheaper than the 3-D modelling. Sue thought this method could also be used in urban areas.

Melca and ISD agreed that they would continue to work together in Telecho to build the capacity of the community. This session ended with Million explaining how he produced the base maps.

Ethiopia Organic Seed Action (EOSA):

After lunch Million warmly welcomed Ato Regassa, the Director of EOSA and invited him to say a few words. Regassa said that it is strange that while Ethiopia is known for its variety of seeds, Ethiopians tend to respect others' seeds and not their own. He recounted the roots of EOSA when a group of people came together about 30 years ago to discuss the protection and preservation of seeds. They then began to collect the diversity of seeds and put them into a gene bank. He made the point that seed diversity is the basis of sustainability and also the basis for adapting to climate change.

In addition to preservation, EOSA is working on diversifying seed varieties and is introducing eco-friendly seed to communities across the country. They are looking to scale up their seed activities and hope to work closely with as many NGOs and other stakeholders as possible. He called for farmers and scientists to work together and described how farmers in southern Ethiopia have started to crossbreed maize.



The Telecho representatives then presented their maps to the visitors who had come for the day. This included the map for the future that they had now completed. It was very much along the lines of their map of 30-40 years ago.

Ato Regassa appreciated the knowledge of the farmers and looked forward to farmers conducting their own research trials more and, in conjunction with scientists,

becoming a part of improving their seeds themselves.

The session ended with a short presentation from Sue on ISD's experiences in Tigray. She emphasised that farmers and local agricultural experts did the work, not ISD. ISD gave training, advice and manuals. She also spoke about making compost and the importance of doing this properly; also the fact that to make compost one needs plant material, water, and animal dung and urine. Thus composting is linked to management of the whole environment. A key part of managing the environment in Telecho in future, she felt, will be the management of livestock.

Celebration:

Visitors and residents of Telecho joined together to celebrate on the final evening, with the Telecho community giving the visitors a rich display of Oromo dancing.

