

The MaiMisham, Ethiopia, Resource Development Project

What is it? In 2010 representatives of the Josef Korbel School committed to assist with a multi-pronged development program centered in northern Ethiopia. In concert with the Rotary Club of Denver SE and the St. Andrew United Methodist Church, Peter Van Arsdale and several students worked in the rural Edaga Arbi/MaiMisham area of Tigray Province to assess community needs in the educational, water/sanitation/health, and energy sectors. As a follow-up to this, a library and a rain water catchment system were installed. An electrification system is in the works.

Northern Ethiopia is the land of the fabled Queen of Sheba, home of the ancient Axumite Empire, reputed resting place of the Ark of the Covenant, and home to two of the most important fossil hominids ever discovered: “Lucy” and “Ardi” (each more than three million years old). It also is an area of environmental extremes, where savannahs abut thin forests and plains abut remarkable, almost other-worldly hills.

In this brief, the educational component is discussed. The sole elementary school in the village of MaiMisham had never had a library, yet it had a tradition of having produced people who went on to become some of Tigray’s most prominent leaders and intellectuals. During the Red Terror of the 1970s and thereafter, it also produced a large number of refugees. Some of these people, having reached the United States and thrived, returned to assist with this effort.

What was the approach? The first trip to this region by Van Arsdale took place in 1994. This work later came to represent Participatory Action Research (PAR). Community members, in concert with their indigenous *baito* advisory council, co-led the way as needs were assessed, data were collected, and installations were completed. “Community development” became the frame.

From a macro perspective, the government of Ethiopia has been successful in more than doubling the total number of public schools in the country since 2000. Nearly 80% of these were constructed in rural areas. As a reflection of this and other activity, Ethiopia was ranked 11th in making the greatest advancement within the Human Development Indicators in the United Nations’ Human Development 2010 report—achieving the most improvement on the entire African continent. The rural - urban “literacy divide” has been bridged to some extent.

With rural primary and secondary schools disproportionately suffering from a lack of literacy resources as compared to their urban counterparts, and more universities being constructed in these disadvantaged areas, it follows that many more of these previous beneficial types of relationships should be fostered and/or strengthened. This is especially the case with primary schools, because this is when children are first learning to read and developing the skills necessary to effectively function in future schooling.

What was said? What were the outcomes? A school library was constructed in MaiMisham. Two of the Korbel student researchers, Lisa McCroskey and Ali Mabardi, wrote: “Approaching MaiMisham School for the first time was an overwhelming and humbling experience.... Simple household-level food security seemed to be many farmers’ goal.... [There is] under appreciation of academic education for rural children, either due to limited resources [or] because they are expected to participate in farming activities.... Technology advancement [also is essential].”