

The Dust of the Danakil – Synopsis

In the early 1970s drought struck Ethiopia. By 1973 it was severe and over a million people were affected, their numbers increasing daily by many thousand. The international relief agencies got to work and were soon caring for vast numbers of people in the mountains of Wollo province with dramatic pictures filling the world's TV screens every night.

The people of the Danakil, the Afar, were as badly affected but because their region is a backwater to which nobody wants to go, little thought was given to their plight until it was almost too late. Eventually a project was started aimed at persuading the Afar to adopt season agriculture, rather than simply following their diminishing herds round the disappearing grazing grounds. The idea was to catch seasonal floodwater coming down from the mountains and use it to irrigate fields.

Unfortunately very little thought had been given to the project and nobody was even certain that there would be any flood water. Even so, a team was sent to survey, design and build and irrigated farm, using Afar labour and paying them with food for their work.

Working with the Afar, people with a reputation for savage hostility to strangers, proved to have some interesting features and more than a few frustrations. Add to that the complications of a government that didn't really want to be involved, a project manager who wanted the scheme to fail, tribal and clan rivalries and the complications of drought, disease and raiders from Somali coming to steal livestock, and it became a very interesting and at times exciting project to work on.

We built an irrigation system and a sand dam on another site, despite everyone saying the Afar could never be taught to use tools. They grew a crop and thereafter, until the watercourse being used got completely altered by eroding floods, they carried on trying for a number of years. Sadly, all this happened immediately before the revolution which removed the Emperor and the new government, the Derg, cut all further support to the Afar.

Whilst the international agencies undoubtedly did good relief work, nothing was done to prepare the population to face future droughts. Worse, nobody was interested in even discussing such ideas. In 1983 drought came again, more severe, over a wider area and affecting over

three times as many people. Still nobody did any development work to help people cope.

Today it is happening again, in Somali and Kenya this time and the numbers have again trebled. Apart from dipping in their pockets to offer relief, what could the world do? Lots, but it requires tough politics.