

“Water is Life”: Jawe Village, Oromia, Ethiopia

January 27, 2005

Greetings all, this time from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

Jan will fill you in on our last few days in Israel. On our last day in Israel, my cousin Gabi kindly got up at 4.30 am and drove us to Tel Aviv airport. There followed a 24 hour (sic) trip from Tel Aviv to Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. A direct flight TA-Addis (if available) would have taken about 3 or 4 hours, but the vagaries of international travel and ticketing meant that we went via London (England) and Alexandria (Egypt)-- hence the 24 hours. As you can see from any map, it is approximately as if you would fly from Melbourne to Tasmania via Singapore and Auckland...

The main aim of this last (Ethiopian) leg of our 6 week trip is to visit three lots of Ethiopian villages: (1) Villages which have had clean water wells provided through the Morawetz Social Justice Fund during the past year or two; (2) Comparable villages that have no source of clean water; (3) Other villages that have had clean water wells for ten years.

During our 9 days in Ethiopia, we are kindly being hosted by Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad, through whom the grants for the wells were made, and by their local Ethiopian counterpart self-help organisations, by and with whom the wells were dug.

Jawe Village is located about two hours drive from Addis Ababa. We travelled most of that on the asphalt road from Addis to Kenya -- the last 10 or 15 mins were off that road.

We travelled in a 4WD with Mehari and his driver. Mehari, an Ethiopian in his late 30s, is married with two small daughters. He studied geology, I think, and has been our host here for the first two days. He is the water expert for the Oromo Self-Help Organisation (OSHO), and has been for 8 or 10 years. OSHO is the local Ethiopian partner organisation for Oxfam-Community Aid Abroad in the Oromia region of Ethiopia.

The Morawetz Social Justice Fund (MSJF), which is a sub-fund of the Melbourne Community Foundation, has funded a well to provide clean water to the people of Jawe Village. This funding was provided through Oxfam-CAA and OSHO. The well was dug about 12 months ago. Jawe village has about 200 huts, and about 1,000 people.

Jan and I arrived at Jawe Village with Mehari and his driver, Wondeson, at about 2 pm. We were met by about 100 villagers, including the 30 or so members of the Village Water Committee (which is evenly divided between

males and females).

Four members of the committee blessed us. Then I was asked to speak. Mehari interpreted into the local language. I said that I believe that we are all brothers and sisters... we people in Australia have clean drinking water... it is not fair that you in Jawe Village did not have clean drinking water... that is why MSJF funded the well.

There followed speeches from some of the committee members, many questions and answers, inspection of the well, and a tour of the village and some of the houses/huts.

I had a huge mix of emotions in all this. I was moved to tears, embarrassed, gratified, daunted...

Embarrassed? One of the women said: "We women bless you each morning when we spend only 15 minutes to get clean water." I was not expecting that!

The women used to walk three hours round trip EVERY DAY to get brown, dirty, polluted water from a river several kilometers away. They would carry it on their backs in a clay pot or, more recently, a 25 litre jerry-can weighing more than 20 kg when full of water. It is HEAVY!

In this river, people and animals are washed (we saw this happening), and people and animals also perform various other functions. So the river water carries many diseases. By contrast, the water from the well has been examined scientifically, and it passes the World Health Organisation standards for acceptable drinking water.

Daunted? This is just one village -- there are so many more in Ethiopia, and elsewhere in the developing world, who do not have clean water. As Mehari said: "Water is life." And furthermore, there are so many other things lacking in Jawe Village. But you have to start somewhere. I am reminded of Jim Stynes story of the boy and the starfish...

A boy was on a beach. As far as the eye could see in both directions, millions of starfish were dying on the beach. The boy was picking up the starfish one by one, and throwing them back into the sea. A man came along, and said to the boy. "What do you think you are doing? Can't you see? There are so many millions of starfish. You can't make a difference." The boy picked up a starfish, looked at it, and threw it into the sea. "Sure made a difference to that one," he said.

The Jawe well was dug using a drill provided by Oxfam CAA (Australia). The drill cost about US\$200,000, and has been used to dig many wells -- a great contribution from Oxfam-CAA.

The Jawe Village well funded by the MSJF cost about A\$10,000, or about \$10 per villager for each of the 1,000 villagers. I could not think of a better use for \$10 than providing a villager with clean water for life.

Jawe Village has both Christians and Muslims. In this village, as elsewhere in Ethiopia, the two religions seem to co-exist peacefully. Wonderful to see.

I am so impressed by the job that the OSHO (and through them Oxfam-CAA) are doing here. The well is just the entry-point -- there is also a lot of work on promotion of women's voice (hence equal numbers of men and women on the Village Water Committee), family planning, improving sanitation, prevention of HIV-AIDS etc. We were also accompanied by a social worker on a motor bike (Ahmet -- Ethiopian male) for part of these last two days, and he does a great job too. OSHO also has a female gender-equity officer in Addis, whom we met briefly.

We later visited a village that has had water from hand-dug wells for some years, is using this water for irrigation, and has much successful agriculture happening -- whereas most of the surrounds we passed through are arid and there is minimal cultivation. Water, it's so crucial here.

A lot of the circular mud huts with thatched roofs in Jawe Village and elsewhere must look the same as those from hundreds (and thousands?) of years ago. Especially in this part of the world, economic development, I have to remind myself, is a long slow process that takes generations, centuries.

In Jawe village, some people proudly showed us that their mud huts were made of mud BRICKS. Some showed us, equally proudly, that they now sleep on mud beds with straw mattresses (and not on the dusty ground), while others have constructed mud chairs in their huts. One or two now have a stove for cooking. In other villages, the richer people now use corrugated iron rooves, which do not need to be replaced/repared every year.

Overall, I feel so fortunate to be hosted by Oxfam-CAA and OSHO here. I have always been one who loves to visit villages when travelling, and I love to talk to the local people. That would have been impossible here without our hosts.

This internet place needs to close down -- they have kindly stayed overtime so we can finish. Gotta go.

Lots of love to you all,
David