

# School through the fields in Sodo



**Caroline  
O'Doherty**

**Ethiopia**

**T**O SCHOOL through the fields took on a new meaning when Irish donors opened a secondary school in rural Ethiopia yesterday.

On land that once grew maize surrounded by Ethiopia's famous Rift Valley mountains, Kella High School in Sodo was officially opened in preparation for the first day of term on Monday.

Donating commonage to a building project is an enormous sacrifice for a community that relies heavily on agriculture and has a past blighted by drought and hunger, but Fekede Tufa of the community committee said there was unanimous agreement on the move.

"Before this there was only one high school in a region of 180,000 people and it is 10 kilometres away so no-one can afford to send their children there — only the well-off — so most children drop out of school at age 14," he said through an interpreter.

"On top of this, for girl students it was completely

impossible because of the fear of abduction or rape. The only option for girls was to marry and have children," he added.

One thousand students aged 15-16 spent this week registering to begin attending classes on Monday — so many that lessons will take place in morning and afternoon shifts with the school open from 8am to 7pm.

Later it is hoped to build several more blocks and install lighting along the rough track that crosses the fields to it so that even more students can be accommodated at night.

The 1.7 million birr (about €120,000) spent so far on the project was provided by Irish donors

through development agency Self Help Africa which has been working in the area since 2002 helping to improve farming practices.

The regional government agreed in advance to supply and pay for the teachers and the running of the facility on a permanent basis and many hundreds of local families not only gave over their shared land but also provided the labour for excavation and construction.

Fekede is one of those, who lent his labour for free, but sees the fact that four of his children will have a school to go to as more than sufficient reward.

"The people in this area have very small holdings so it is a big gesture to give the land, but you can not put a monetary value on education. To improve our lives we must have education. We have learnt to invest in our farms and we must invest in our children too."

● Caroline O'Doherty is travelling in Ethiopia with Self Help Africa. [www.selfhelpafrica.com](http://www.selfhelpafrica.com)