

Erratic rains a complication for farmers

SO YOU think you know all about rain, living in Ireland, rewarding all residents with instant expertise on the subject?

Ethiopia challenges any notions of supremacy. Here the rain has a language all its own.

There are small rains and big rains, generally but not exclusively known as the belg and kireempt, and sometimes there are minor rains that follow the others and go by any one of three different names.

They fall or fail at different times in different places, producing bumper crops or scenes of devastation with cruel synchronicity.

Those who have lived here and learned to make sense of it generally take a deep breath when asked to explain and preface their attempt with: "It's complicated."

Complicated is why a trip to Ethiopia, which for months has been in the news because of stories of drought and impending famine, reveals the capital, Addis Ababa, to be surrounded by a lush green landscape under a pleasantly cloud-coated sky.

It's why, when other parts of the country resemble a dust bowl, a journey south through the rural expanse of Oromia state takes in endless fields of the native Ethiopian grain, teff, shimmering silkily in lime green luminescence like a giant golf course thrown over the land.

It's why, soon after midday in Kekersa village yesterday, the sound of thunder rolled close by, heralding the cloudburst to follow an hour later.

It was a short shower, however — the first in four days and over in minutes. The sky promised more.

That's part of the complication. Whatever is written

in the sky must not be mistaken for what is written in stone.

Dr Awol Mela, Africa director with development agency Self Help Africa and a veteran of 30 years learning the language of the rain in his native country, explained the challenge.

"You have to expect drought at any time. This year it may be good, next year it may be bad," he said.

"It's green now but the rains may fall short. You really gamble with nature. You gamble to control this important gift and then it either comes late or goes early. So you must always expect drought and be prepared to beat it."

In Kekersa and the other areas where the agency works, being prepared means tapping ground water so crops can be irrigated

when the rains misbehave, planting fast-growing varieties of crop to make the most of shortened rains, using drought-resistant seeds where possible and, above all, diversifying into a mix of grains, fruits and vegetables so that if one crop fails, everything is not lost.

In Kekersa, it is a strategy that has brought the community from haunting insecurity to stability and even success.

Confidence sprouts from farmers once frustrated beyond endurance as they show visitors around their small holdings with pride.

But it's a small pride — the belg of prides, not the kireempt — because nobody around here wants to get too cocky.

"The rains are erratic and getting more so," Mr Mela explained. "I remember as a small boy whenever I was walking to school there was plenty of dew in the fields. Even our trousers were soaked. But when we go now to walk in the morn-

ing it's dry even in the rainy season.

"Things are changing all the time. What we used to know is not enough. We have to keep learning."



Caroline O'Doherty

Ethiopia

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