

Farmers can relate to practical approach of Self Help Africa

Farmers are practical people — they have to be. And they are always ready to understand the difficulties facing other farmers in more demanding climates.

Denise Hall reports

SELF Help Africa (SHA) has been the official charity of choice of the Irish Farmers Association (IFA) for a number of years.

Dedicated as SHA are to delivering practical, cost effective and sustainable solutions to the challenge facing Africa's rural poor, theirs is a message that farmers the world over can relate to.

"Our origins are in rural Ireland," says SHA's George Jacob. "And the Ploughing gives us a great opportunity to connect with those rural roots.

"Some of our visitors support us through direct debit, so it's an ideal opportunity for us to meet them. Other people don't know all that much about us, and want to talk about the work we do, or pick up an information pack. And every year we have a themed photo exhibition of our projects. That always attracts great interest."

Self Help Development International came into being in 1984 as a direct response to the devastating Ethiopian famine. Improving agricultural production form the small farmer is an obvious priority.

But Self Help also works to improve health and education and, through the creation of cooperative structures and access to credit, aims to build the capacity of rural communities. One of Self Help's first major interventions in Africa in the mid-1980's was the shipping of

"Cara", the doughty Donegal seed potato to Ethiopia.

Earlier this year, Self Help Development International merged with The UK-based Harvest Help, an agency also devoted to rural development and food security in sub-Saharan Africa. Together they formed Self Help Africa.

"Since the merger, we have programmes in nine African countries," George says. "So this year we've got a lot more to report to all those people who support us.

"We find visitors to the Ploughing are really interested in learning about our work. Farmers are practical people — they have to be. And they are well able to understand the difficulties facing other farmers who are up against drought, desertification, increase in the price of seed and fertiliser and a decrease in prices for their product.

"We offer a practical, hands-on approach to some of their problems and Irish farmers can relate to that."

SHA works in partnership with local self-help groups but does not employ expatriate staff in the field, preferring instead to recruit indigenous staff. The organisation employs 300 people in Africa and operates with a core staff of just 10 in Ireland.

Last year SHA focused on the work and contribution of women and announced that more than 13,000 women have started their own income generating activities after taking loans from savings and credit co-ops, organised with the

support of Self Help Ethiopia.

"We've got ambitious plans," George continues. "We want to deliver more support to more rural Africans and small farmers. More than 80% of Africans depend heavily on growing their own food. Our work helps them to do this on a sustainable basis.

"At the Ploughing we have the opportunity to connect with a whole range of people, many of whom have

a first hand knowledge of the struggle many rural African peoples are facing."

And it's inspirational stories like that of Ethiopian woman Ngist Ayere, who, thanks to on-going support from SHA, has recently built a new home, enrolled her three children in school, and joined the Women's Credit Union and qualified for a loan. Now Ngist is fattening oxen to sell on.