



Katy Ziabe (left) with some of her friends at Duusi village, in northern Ghana. JASON O'BRIEN



Even amid crushing poverty, young Africans dare to dream

Jason O'Brien

KATY Ziabe knows what she wants to be when she grows up. "A doctor," she says shyly. Nobody has the heart to set her straight.

But she is a bright five-year-old and will figure it out soon enough: it costs money to change dreams into reality.

Like most places, getting the level of education needed to be a professional medical worker in Ghana is expensive. And Katy's parents don't have money. That is not to say that they don't have money to spare - right now, they don't have any money whatsoever.

"We don't have savings," Aita Bada, her 19-year-old mother, says through an interpreter. "We don't often use money. Sometimes we sell produce at market for money, but usually we just exchange for things we want. But at the moment we don't have produce to bring to market."

Indeed, at the moment, they don't have enough produce to feed themselves.

Katy is still in nursery school, a simple one-room building a couple of fields away from her home in the remote village of Duusi, in northern Ghana. She attends five days a week, for three hours.

And her favourite subject? "English," she says in the local dialect, bringing giggles from the friends surrounding her.

She is due to start primary school next year and, technically, she is entitled to free education there. In reality, the cost of a uniform or even stationery will be extremely difficult for her parents to meet.

Even if they do, the €175-a-year fees for high school and beyond might as well be €175,000.

And yet Aita is also able to dream.

"Katy has a vision of what she

wants to do," she says. "We will see what happens when the time comes. I think it will be possible."

It would be churlish to ask how, exactly.

Other kids in the group talk of becoming government ministers.

Meanwhile, much of the rest of Ghana, a country of 24 million inhabitants in West Africa, is using the World Cup to escape, looking forward to the game in the last 16, against the USA today.

The biggest sporting event in the world has impacted very little on Duusi, not least because none of the 20 mud huts inside the fort-like structure have a television or, indeed, electricity.

So has Katy heard of Michael Essien, Ghana's top player? She nods slowly.

She saw him on a poster on a visit to Bolgatanga, the nearest big city, about 30km away, and she has heard his name on the radio.

"We had a (battery-operated) radio," her mother confirms. "But it is broken now. If we want to listen, we go to my father-in-law's house. But we don't go too often."

Katy plays football with the boys sometimes. With her slight build and shaven head, her ragged T-shirt and bare feet on the rocky ground, she is easily mistaken for a boy.

Not that there is a regular football to be had, rather scraps of plastic bags rolled together. But boys being boys, they are a little over-enthusiastic so Katy mostly sticks with the girls.

"We play tea sets," she says, pointing to a container and mimicking her mother preparing food and washing up bowls.

It's good she gets out from under her mother's feet. Their hut, roughly measuring six metres by six metres and with a thatched grass roof, has no windows. It is "always hot inside", Katy says. Today it is 39C outside.

There is one rocking chair, which takes up much of the available space and a thin mat on which the family - two adults and three children under the age of five - sleep.

Pots and containers are piled up on a small table and, although it is tidy, the single room is overrun with flies and bugs. There is no running water. There is a single lantern.

"My father-in-law built it for us," Aita says, explaining the father of the groom also pays for the wedding ceremony. She met her husband when visiting her sister in Duusi.

"I want a house with a better roof," she says, pointing to a neighbour's home covered with galvanised tin. "It would be cooler in the sun."

Aita thinks perhaps her husband, a farmer, could go south to the capital Accra to look for work. Or maybe to Bolgatanga.

Bolgatanga has seen its population almost double to 900,000 in less than 20 years. Improvements in health over that time have meant fewer children are dying, but the poor land - worsened by drought and erosion - simply isn't capable of supporting the current average of seven people per family.

Overpopulation is the next big issue

At the moment, most of the 200 or so inhabitants of Duusi are surviving on two meals a day, both consisting of a porridge made of millet grain. A varied diet it ain't.

But the rainy season has begun and planting is under way using sustainable agriculture techniques learned from **Self Help Africa** to get the full - if limited - potential from the harsh landscape. In time, they hope to be back to three meals per day, with rice and vegetables added to the mix.

All going to plan, there will be enough to exchange for some chickens, or maybe a goat at market. All going to plan, they

will be able to grow some morenga trees to help stave off malaria when it inevitably strikes again.

All going to plan, Aita will be able to source the materials to make a uniform for Katy.

"I know I have to work hard," Katy says shyly when asked what she will need to do to become a doctor.

History shows it doesn't all go to plan here for too long.

Jason O'Brien travelled to Ghana with Self Help Africa