



Despite dire poverty, many in northern Ghana believe life is slowly improving



Farmers struggle to subsist in fields similar to those of the Famine era, writes **Conor Sweeney** in Bolgatanga

RIPPING UP my paperwork, the Ghanaian border guard says I've made a mistake on the form and if I want to enter the country, I'll have to pay \$5 for a new application.

I decline his surly request but manage to cross the border at the next check without any queries about this missing white piece of paper.

It's a minor brush with the authorities, but a reminder that along with poverty and illness, corruption and the other well-known problems affecting this part of Western Africa still haven't gone away.

Northern Ghana enjoys little of the relative prosperity that surrounds the country's coastal capital, Accra, in the south.

The former British colony of 23 million people was the first sub-Saharan country to get its independence, in 1957, and although it has natural resources such as gold and offshore oil, the north has been deforested and overgrazed, with millions living in poverty. Statistically, Ghana may be more affluent than neighbouring Togo and Burkina Faso, but there's little difference along their common border areas, says Jean Claude Wedraogo, Self Help Africa's regional director.

In the fields a few kilometres from the regional capital of Bolgatanga, farmers work on patches of land of three to five acres – similar in size to the fields many Irish farmers struggled to subsist on during the era of the Famine.

They try to sustain their families while at the same time coping with diseases such as malaria, still a major problem in this region. It debilitates entire families when it strikes during the rainy season, with little protection for remote villagers.

"You feel feverish and your entire body becomes weak, you can't do anything, you can't work and it can take three or four days to go away," says 46-year-old Zobil Yinboka. He explains that mosquitoes become infected with malaria through the stagnant ponds that develop across the open land after the heavy rain.

"Malaria last year was a constant problem for the whole family. People had to go to hospital, it's a serious sickness and it affects everyone," says Yinboka, who has six children.

But like other farmers in this part of Ghana, Yinboka is optimistic that with ongoing assistance, life is definitely improving, his children are in school and they have enough to eat. In his case the assistance has been in the form of three goats, training, and the construction of a new animal pen where dung can be gathered for use as fertilizer.

Wedraogo believes the only way to eradicate poverty across the region will be through a series of many tiny steps. He suggests a modest wishlist, which he believes will make a substantial difference to people under the poverty line across the three countries where he oversees projects.

"I would support farmers to grow more, and provide them with small tools to work in their fields. I would provide them with ample seeds and give them adequate training to use them. We also need to develop small-scale irrigation and then provide potable water to people –

that's what I would do," he said.

Another farmer who is receiving assistance through Self Help Africa's local partners is Bill Bowasapal in Duusi, in Ghana's Bongo district.

He has constructed concentric stone walls around his hilltop home with the help of neighbours, which not only clears the land for growing millet, but prevents soil nutrients being washed away to lower land.

"The land is very poor in Northern Ghana, with only one crop per year compared to two per year in the south of the country," says Stella Aninyie, a development worker with Self Help Africa's local partner, as she gestures towards the small, stone-walled fields around Duusi.

She says farmers are under pressure to provide for the families, but that women, as in other West African countries, still face a bleak future. "A dowry is four cows, so husbands feel they have bought them, just like that," says Aninyie.

The recent discovery of offshore oil could propel Ghana to become one of the largest energy exporters in Africa. It has raised hopes for some people that the country's post-colonial fortunes can be transformed, though others fear that like other countries, the oil wealth will be a curse, not a blessing.

Among young people, in a school close to Duusi there is confidence that their own destinies would not depend on fossil fuel discoveries.

Underneath a sign that states "No vernacular here, only English spoken", teenagers are positive about their own prospects. "I want to be a doctor," is the simple answer from Patricia Tariban (17), who comes from a farming family of eight, when asked what she

wants to do after school. Her classmate Joseph Tarang (18), is just as certain that he will not continue to work in agriculture, like his father.

"Sometimes we have to stay out of school to help my father on the farm – my mother is no longer living, but I want to be a pilot in the air force. If I really work hard, I can achieve it," he says, with a determined expression and an eye to a better future.

This is the last in a three-part series on West Africa. Conor Sweeney travelled to Ghana with Self Help Africa – selfhelpafrica.org



Jean Claude Wedraogo, Self Help Africa's regional director, believes the only ways to eradicate poverty across the region will be through a series of many tiny steps. Photograph: Conor Sweeney