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America

**OXFAM**Exchange  
WINTER 2011

# CREATING A CULTURE OF INNOVATION

**ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:**

100 YEARS STRONG: INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY  
A LIFE-CHANGING WATER NETWORK IN ETHIOPIA  
FEEDING OUR OWN IN HAITI



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4



9



12

# CONTENTS

VOLUME 11, ISSUE 1

<b>Media mashup</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Make a difference: International Women's Day</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Farmer Field Schools in Vietnam</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>A life-changing water network in Ethiopia</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Feeding our own in Haiti</b>	<b>12</b>

## OXFAMExchange WINTER 2011

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**ABOVE: (Left)** Hien Mai Thi is a farmer in Yen Bai province in Vietnam, where she helps train others to use the System of Rice Intensification. *Chau Doan / Oxfam America* **(Top right)** Animals benefit as much as people from the new water delivery system Oxfam helped construct in Birkitu, Ethiopia. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America* **(Bottom right)** Haitian farmer and community leader Jacqueline Morette (at left) joins hands with another church-goer during a service at Notre Dame d'Haiti in Miami, Florida. *Anna Kramer / Oxfam America*

**COVER:** Vuong Hoang Kim checks her rice as it nears maturity in northern Vietnam. She is one of the first people in her commune to grow rice using the System of Rice Intensification, which she learned in an Oxfam-supported workshop conducted through the agriculture ministry. *Chau Doan / Oxfam America*

We welcome your feedback. Please direct letters to [editor@oxfamamerica.org](mailto:editor@oxfamamerica.org).

**ERRATA:** Our last issue of OXFAMExchange contained two errors. The article "A win brings hope for oil and mining communities" incorrectly stated that the explosion at the Deepwater Horizon oil rig occurred in May 2010; it occurred in April. The article also incorrectly stated that Tullow Energy and Statoil already disclose their payments voluntarily everywhere that they operate; the correct companies are Talisman Energy and Statoil.

## Dear Friends,

On January 12th one year ago, the lives of millions of Haitians were changed forever. As the tragedy unfolded, Americans were quick to lend support. An estimated one of every two US families gave something to Haitian recovery—tens of thousands of them to Oxfam. We were fortunate to have had the resources on the ground to allow us to use that support to respond quickly.

In the days following the earthquake, I witnessed the best in my colleagues. Our staff in Haiti carried a dying co-worker miles on foot in search of medical care. In the States, staff drew together immediately, working swiftly to implement our humanitarian response and to rally public support.

In spite of demands in Haiti, Oxfam's work elsewhere continued. We helped people fighting tragedy on an epic scale last year. We responded to crises from Pakistan to Darfur, from flooding in West Africa to tropical storms in Central America. Meanwhile, our ongoing development and advocacy work flourished. By late 2010, Saving for Change, our microfinance program, had reached nearly 320,000 people in Mali. With Oxfam's support, use of the System of Rice Intensification accelerated in East Asia, helping more farmers use fewer seeds and less water to achieve higher yields. Oxfam's work contributed to the Salvadoran legislature passing a new law in 2010 criminalizing violence against women. Our efforts in Peru influenced the Congress there to enact a citizen consultation law that supports indigenous rights. And we achieved a major win in the US with the passage of oil, gas, and mining transparency legislation.

Reflecting on all we accomplished, I am humbled. As the new year begins, I want to congratulate you on your achievements in 2010. For Oxfam's successes are yours: the progress we make is a testament not only to the dedication of Oxfam's staff and partners, but also to the potential of a movement that is fueled by your commitment.

Imagine what we can achieve together in 2011.

Sincerely,

Raymond C. Offenheiser  
President, Oxfam America

**media mashup >** look. watch. listen. join the conversation.

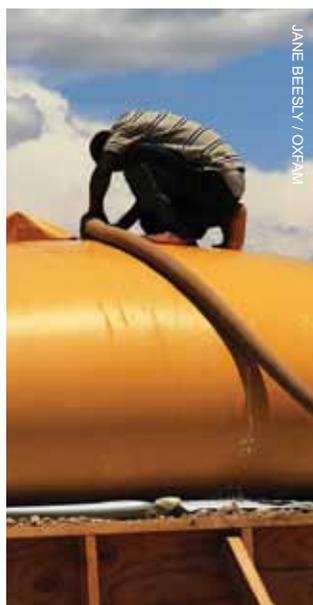
## 1.12.11. Oxfam in Haiti: One year on



TOBY ADAMSON / OXFAM

**1.12.11. WATCH >** “Stand with Haiti”  
[oxfamamerica.org/standwithhaiti](http://oxfamamerica.org/standwithhaiti)

## 1.12.11. READ > On the necessity of moving from emergency response to long-term development in Haiti



JANE BEESLY / OXFAM

“The government does not have a plan,” says Oxfam spokeswoman Julie Schindall. “We need them to make decisions.”

Installing permanent systems is less costly than delivering emergency water, Schindall says. A \$5 million water system that Oxfam built recently in Cap-Haitien serves 100,000 people and will last decades, Schindall says. In contrast, Oxfam has spent \$30 million in nine months providing emergency water from tanker trucks and water bladders to 316,000 people, she says.

“Putting in the most basic infrastructure is what will keep people safe in Haiti,” she says.

—excerpted from *USA Today*, Nov 19, 2010

## OXFAM IN THE NEWS

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**We can crack the climate finance nut with innovative sources of public finance that don't shift the responsibility onto taxpayers.**

—David Waskow, Oxfam's climate change policy specialist, as cited in *The New York Times*, Nov. 7, 2010

## FROM THE OXFAM BLOG



MICHAEL PRINCE / OXFAM AMERICA

**Indie band and Oxfam produce music video on oil spill recovery on the Gulf Coast**  
by Bob Ferguson

Big news, all: I'm very proud to present the world debut of Oxfam America's video for the song “Sweet Talk, Sweet Talk” by iconic indie-rockers The New Pornographers.

And this isn't your ordinary music video. Produced and directed by Oxfam's Shannon Hart-Reed, it focuses on the aftermath of the massive BP oil spill in the Gulf Coast.

The Gulf Coast oil spill is making headlines right now as one of the biggest stories of the year. But come January 2011, we don't want the most vulnerable people in this area to be forgotten ...

Read the rest of this story at [blogs.oxfamamerica.org](http://blogs.oxfamamerica.org),  
keyword: **debut**

## MAKE A DIFFERENCE: GET INVOLVED



# Stand up with women worldwide

### Learn >

In March 1911, more than one million women and men in five countries took to the streets. They rallied in support of women's right to vote, to hold public office, and to work alongside men for equal pay—marking the first official celebration of International Women's Day.

One hundred years later, International Women's Day is a national holiday in many countries. And March 8 is an occasion to celebrate the rights and accomplishments of women worldwide.

Women have made great strides since those marches before World War I. We are leaders in fields from politics to business to social activism. Many of us have more opportunities for education and entrepreneurship than ever before.

Yet women and girls still make up the majority of people living below the poverty line. Women still feel the greatest effects during disasters and conflicts. And although women produce most of the world's food, millions of rural women are now facing hunger.

Through its work around the world, Oxfam supports women and girls as they overcome inequalities, realize their potential, and become decision makers and leaders. Oxfam is also harnessing the power of women to create political and social change through its Sisters on the Planet initiative.

Inspired by women here and abroad who are battling the impacts of climate change on their communities, a diverse group of American women joined Oxfam America as Sisters on the Planet beginning in 2008. Today, the Sisters on the Planet are raising awareness about climate change, hunger, and other crises facing women in poor countries. They're calling on leaders to invest in women like Vuong Hoang Kim (see story, page 4), Jibo Ruda (page 8), and Jacqueline Morette (page 12)—women who are taking the initiative to fight hunger and poverty from the ground up.

### Get involved >

In the spirit of the first International Women's Day, we believe that the collective actions of women (and men) can bring about lasting change. Here's how you can join our effort this spring:

- **Watch and join** Go to [oxfamamerica.org/sisters](http://oxfamamerica.org/sisters) to watch and share our new videos featuring the Sisters on the Planet. Then sign up to become a Sister (or a brother).



- **Take action** Visit our online hub for activists, [actfast.oxfamamerica.org](http://actfast.oxfamamerica.org), to add your image to our photo action in support of women fighting hunger worldwide.

ABOVE: On International Women's Day 2010, Oxfam's Sisters on the Planet initiative hosted leaders from the US and abroad (pictured) for a Washington, DC, summit on women-led solutions to climate change. *Ilene Perlman / Oxfam America*



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Vuong Hoang Kim in her rice field near her home in Dai Phac commune, in the northern province of Yen Bai in Vietnam. She says that since she devoted as much of her paddy land as possible to growing rice using the System of Rice Intensification, her family is earning more and has more cash for buying clothes and school books for her eight-year-old son – with a little left to invest in growing vegetables, a new source of cash and nutrition for her family. *Chau Doan / Oxfam America*

# Farmer schools in the fields

Reporting from East Asia, [Chris Hufstader](#) explores how Oxfam brought together the right players in Vietnam to ensure that a great idea got the high-level and the grassroots support needed to achieve big results.

Dew lingers on the rice plants in Vuong Hoang Kim's field. In the early light, each drop is a silver orb, suspended momentarily until it drops into the water below. Here in Vietnam's northern province of Yen Bai, the rice paddies are vast, bordered by hills full of hardwoods and cinnamon. The small town of Dai Phac is home to 740 families who grow rice in these paddies.

Neighbors call her Miss Vuong. Although only 28, she is a leader in her community, one of the first to cultivate rice using a method called System of Rice Intensification, or SRI. She says she attended a workshop conducted by the ministry of agriculture and visited areas where farmers were already using SRI. She could see the difference: The plants were bigger, healthier and were producing more grains than plants grown by conventional methods.

Vuong says she devoted as much of her land as possible to SRI, and starting with her first of three annual harvests she immediately saw an increased yield. "Our income has increased," she says, standing in the rice paddy, the plants reaching nearly to her shoulders. She now grows 110 to 150 pounds more rice on each of her six "perch," a unit of land just under an acre, which translates to an extra \$120 per harvest after covering all her costs. Even better, she does this using less water, less fertilizer, and fewer seeds, and she has more time to devote to growing vegetables in a new garden next to her house. Best of all, Vuong says her increased income is helping pay school fees (\$19 a year) and buy clothes

and books for her eight-year-old son, and she is reinvesting some of the money for use in subsequent plantings.

## Seeing is believing

Things that sound too good to be true usually are, but farmers around the world are seeing the results of SRI firsthand. Farmers in Dai Phac, and others in the Dong Phu commune just south of Hanoi, all report that SRI's techniques are saving them time because they transplant seed-

**This is the beauty of SRI: Farmers can make significant improvements in their rice production, and their lives, without great expense, building on what they already do, with the seeds and tools they already have.**

lings earlier, which is easier and faster. They are saving money because by transplanting only the sturdiest seedlings and planting them farther apart, they are growing healthier plants with stronger roots—plants that require less fertilizer, are more resistant to pests, and produce more rice. They tightly control the water they use to suppress weeds during some stages of plant growth, which frees up water for other uses. Less demand for water and reduced pesticide usage puts less pressure on the environment. By growing the plants in orderly rows, it is easier to weed around the plants, another labor-saving attribute of SRI.

SRI is a different type of agricultural innovation, one that does not require high-tech solutions, like genetically modified seeds. It just takes the normal seeds already being used and optimizes their growth using slightly different techniques. "Traditional varieties can do well," says Cornell University's Norman Uphoff, who is studying how SRI is being adopted and adapted by farmers around the world. He says this is why there are few scientists focused on SRI: There is no potential technological magic bullet that can bring glory to a researcher or profits to an agribusiness firm. "Scientists are accustomed to working on new seed varieties and improving fertilizers," Uphoff says.

This is the beauty of SRI: Farmers can make significant improvements in their rice production, and their lives, without great expense, building on what they already do, with the seeds and tools they already have. "The benefits of SRI are captured by the farmer," says Minh Le, director of Oxfam's program in Vietnam, which is not always true for other types of innovation that involve new seeds or pesticides.

This is why farmer-based improvements like SRI are an important step in meeting demand to feed a growing world population: The great leaps forward in agricultural production achieved by the so-called Green Revolution of the 1960s were based on new technology, but deteriorating soils and scarce water may limit the impact of new technological approaches in the twenty-first century. However, there are still things farm-



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When people come here, they see the clean environment, they see the fish in the lakes. They can see the environment is better here.

ers can do to innovate and build a better future for themselves, instead of waiting for the next elusive technological miracle.

### Farmer Field Schools

Oxfam first began supporting organizations promoting SRI in Cambodia in 2000, and the farmers started seeing results almost immediately: Yields increased from 50 to 150 percent. By 2009, more than 110,000 Cambodian families (nearly five percent of farmers), in 4,500 villages, were using the technique, making \$150 more per acre than they had growing conventional rice.

Meanwhile, Vietnam's Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) was looking at ways to expand Vietnam's rice production. When Vietnam liberalized its economy in the 1980s, rice production rose quickly, growing by 86 percent between 1990 and 2005. This coincided with a drastic jump in fuel and fertilizer costs and increased water scarcity. Small-scale farmers were hit hardest; as prices for rice climbed, so did their costs.

The government began looking for ways to reduce rice-growing costs for these farmers, so Oxfam began working with MARD's Plant Protection Department in 2007. Drawing on our experience in Cambodia, we began recruiting local farmers to train others. These local experts formed a core of SRI proponents and convened Farmer Field Schools, which grew demonstration plots and promoted SRI.

Women have proven essential to encouraging more farmers in Vietnam to switch to SRI. Men and women grow rice together, but men's involvement is usually limited to preparing the fields, transplanting, some application of pesticides when needed, and the harvest. Women are left to do virtually all the other work—especially the weeding—so yield improvements, labor-saving techniques, and expense reductions quickly get the attention of women rice growers in Vietnam. About 70 percent of Farmer Field School participants are women, according to an Oxfam study conducted about a year ago. The study showed that women

recruited an average of five to eight other farmers to try SRI, while men usually only recruited one to three.

### Core team player

Hoang Thi Liem, 53, who lives near Dong Phu, about an hour south of Hanoi, is a typical member of a core team tasked with recruiting farmers to grow SRI rice. She is an expert in SRI practices and says she immediately saw the benefits of SRI for women. "I want to help other women escape poverty, and after I attended the training on SRI, I saw the benefits of the technique, so I just wanted to share my new knowledge with other women."

Liem's experience teaching other women about SRI was typical: The biggest obstacle was convincing them that planting fewer seeds will yield higher production. "I told them that when we transplant the rice according to SRI practices, we just use one seedling as opposed to multiple seedlings. At first the women were a little anxious, asking 'why? Why just one seedling?' But I kept explaining to them, when you do just one seedling, you save a lot of seed, as well as labor when the distance between the clumps is wide, which makes the work

**Left:** Near Dai Nghia commune, farmers have virtually eliminated pesticides from their rice cultivation. They say they are protecting their health and improving the natural environment, as evidenced by the proliferation of fish in nearby lakes and irrigation channels. Eliminating pesticides also helps farmers save money. *Chau Doan/ Oxfam America*

easier. So by growing in a demonstration plot, we could convince the women of the benefits of SRI, and as time goes on the women in the village agree with us on the benefits and advantages of SRI and agree to join us. Because they see the benefit of the lower input costs and the yields increasing considerably, and that's why 80 percent of the fields here are planted using SRI." The demonstration plots showed that when the farmers plant fewer seedlings, the plants develop healthier roots and grains, there is less competition for nutrients, and each plant produces more rice.

### Innovation

There are about 12 different steps to growing SRI rice, but farmers vary their adherence to the regime. Farmers learn how to tailor the growing techniques to their particular situation—to produce more rice without necessarily using more seed, fertilizer, or pesticides, the usual approach to increasing yields. They learn to work smarter, expend less labor and money, and get better results.

This is what makes SRI so powerful for fighting poverty: It is an innovation created by farmers themselves. The growers get the basic training, test their own ideas, and share these results with others. After SRI comes to town, farmers change the way they think about their work and themselves—they are excited to try new ideas, and when ideas work well, they are proud of their results.

And once farmers develop this culture of collaboration and innovation, it continues. "We are farmers, so we see each other at the market, at our fields, so we always talk and share our experience," says Hien Mai Thi, 49, a member of the agricultural cooperative at Dai Phac and a member of the core team there. "At harvest time we share labor. I might help others harvest and they might help me, so we share knowledge and information while we work."

She says this type of collaboration is most crucial when pests or diseases suddenly appear and threaten their crops. "When we find diseases or pests, we try to get advice from others about what type of pesticides to use, and if we visit a field and see a problem, we can go talk with the farmer and find a solution." Farmer Field Schools are pushing for this sort of collaboration, and encouraging new ideas. "It's creating a culture of innovation," says Oxfam's Minh Le. "It goes beyond empowerment and translates into action."

### Reducing risks

Just before harvest rice plants are most vulnerable to pests and diseases. "An insect known as a brown hopper can carry a virus that it can transmit to rice plants," says Dung Ngo Tien, deputy director of the Plant Protection Department in MARD and an expert in pest management. "We lost 20,000 hectares [49,000 acres] to this virus in one province last year. People are saying diseases like this are an effect of climate change, so we want to help farmers predict when this type of pest population can develop, and create solutions. We also want to minimize pesticide usage as these also kill natural enemies of the plant hopper, like spiders."

The Farmer Field Schools help farmers understand their options and determine what will work best for their particular context. "We need to help farmers improve their knowledge, manage their own fields, and question recommendations from pesticide companies," he says. In this way, "they can work together with other farmers to develop their own solutions to pest problems."

Cutting down on seed, pesticides, and other costs really helps the poorest farmers in Vietnam, says Dung. "It's important for them to reduce costs so they can educate their children, so SRI helps them reduce pesticide usage...and it's also better for their health," Dung says.

In the area south of Hanoi near Dai Nghia commune, one of the first communities to test SRI in the entire country, none of the farmers are currently using pesticides. "When people come here, they see the clean environment, they see the fish in the lakes," says Tien Tran Minh, a farmer in Dai Nghia. "They can see the environment is better here." He went on to say that the 100 percent reduction in pesticide use coincides with a 10 to 15 percent reduction in input costs, and a 30 percent increase in rice production. They are happy about earning more money, Tien says, but "the most important success is the clean environment, it's what we treasure most."

### Payoff

When Oxfam started working with MARD to promote SRI in Vietnam in 2007, there were about 3,400 farmers cultivating SRI rice on 42,000 acres. By 2009 there were nearly 800,000 farmers using SRI practices on 286,000 acres all over the country. On average, Dung says these farmers are seeing between 50 and 70 percent reduction in seed costs, and using only 20 to 40 percent as much urea fertilizer. Dung estimates farmers have reduced pesticide use by 80 to 100 percent. Oxfam's research is showing that farmers are earning an extra \$25 to \$50 on each acre through savings and increased yield. This translates to between 20 and 50 percent increase in profits. In a country where the average person earns about \$1,000 a year, an extra \$200 a year can keep a young student in college or buy several pigs.

According to Dung, his work in the agriculture ministry to prevent plant diseases and pests is greatly enhanced by SRI. By saving on costs and labor, SRI is aiding the farmers who need the most help. "We're so happy to work with Oxfam, because we have the same goal," Dung says, "to support the poorest farmers."



#### Read | Learn | Change the world

To learn more about hunger, food security, and our work on these issues, go to [oxfamamerica.org/hunger-food-security](http://oxfamamerica.org/hunger-food-security).

A woman with dark skin and braided hair, wearing a colorful patterned shawl over a maroon top, holds a large, round, weathered wooden water pot. She is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and a bright sky.

# We'll take care of this like our life

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Bori Tondha says before the Birkitu water delivery system was built she would spend hours each day collecting water for her family, leaving her little time for anything else—even milking her cows. Now, with water nearby, she can fetch it in smaller amounts several times a day and have time left for other pursuits. *Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*

Oxfam's **Coco McCabe** reports how the ingenuity behind a \$400,000 water network in Birkitu, Ethiopia, is pairing strong infrastructure with traditional management practices: a system designed for the very people who use it.

Born anew: That's how the people of Birkitu, Ethiopia, describe themselves now that water, as vital as their own circulatory systems, flows to them through a network of pipes from a spring to which they once spent hours hiking each day.

Nestled in a glade more than 4,000 feet above sea level, water from a spring is used to serve animals and people alike. They would come to drink and wash and fill heavy clay pots to lug home on their backs. But drinking water contaminated with suds and animal waste sickened many people and killed some.

Those days are gone.

Across the hills of this farming and herding community a seven-hour drive south from Addis Ababa, spring water that Oxfam America and its partner, Action for Development, have piped through 1.8 miles of underground lines has changed the lives of families here. It gushes, clean and cold, from neighborhood taps that serve 3,870 people. It sloshes into cement-lined troughs from which 35,000 animals now quench their thirst. And it gurgles through the irrigation channels that snake through the fields of 150 households.

"This water saved our lives," says Danbi Mokona, a member of the Birkitu water committee, which is charged with ensuring the smooth operation of the gravity-fed system.

"We know how much we suffered before this water project," adds Guye Elema, chairman of the committee. "We'll take care of this like our life."

For many people in developing countries, access to clean water is a dream at best: According to the World Health Organization, 884 million people do not have access

to an improved source of drinking water and 37 percent of them live in sub-Saharan Africa. In Ethiopia, nearly half of its 79 million people don't have access to clean water, says the World Bank, and frequent outbreaks of water-related epidemics are the consequence.

The people of Birkitu have moved beyond those statistics—for now anyway. With its interconnected storage ponds and drinking troughs, its holding tanks and water points, their \$400,000 network could be a challenge to maintain as the years tick by. But it was designed with the understanding that a reliable water supply depends not only on infrastructure—on pipes and valves and tons of cement—but on simplicity and the incorporation of traditional management practices. That's the beauty of this system: It's modern, but it delivers water in a way that makes sense for the people who use it—and revere it.

"Water is the first item they respect in a pastoralist society," says Tibebe Koji, an Oxfam America program officer who has been working closely with the families of Birkitu. Even the Afaan Oromo word for water—"bishan"—is revered, he says. And at Birkitu, that reverence is at the heart of the story about how the spring—the source of life for all around—came into being.

### **Birkitu's beginnings**

It all began with the longing of a rich man many years ago, says Urago Tona, an elder who was visiting the spring one morning in mid-August. Water not captured by the new delivery system rippled around the rocks near which he stood, the shade of the trees arced over them, cooling the air. This is the story he told about Birkitu—the Afaan Oromo word for spring:

*The rich man owned a great number of animals—the foundation of wealth in herding cultures—but regularly he would have to make three-day treks with them to a spot where they could drink, as there was no water here. The animals were growing very weary. So one night, the rich man prayed to God for relief for his livestock, and when he awoke in the morning water was flowing miraculously by his house. He selected a pregnant cow, brought her a short distance downstream and slaughtered her: There the water stopped flowing and pooled into a pond from which the animals could drink. Birkitu was born.*

The rich man's struggle to find water for his livestock is the same one many herders across Ethiopia face today: They walk long distances to ensure the survival of their animals. And the challenge is as great for their families, especially women and girls, to whom the task of fetching water for household use—drinking, washing, cooking—usually falls. Hours are lost on a daily chore that keeps girls out of school and robs women of the time they could spend on more productive pursuits that would benefit them and their families.

But by tapping the water and channeling it across the hills, the spring—Birkitu—has been born again, this time serving many more in a community thirsty for clean water.

### **Water brings income, school, better health**

Now that outdoor faucets have been installed near her house, Jibo Ruda says water is close enough that if she were to choke, she could dash out the door and grab a gulp. For the mother of nine children, that proximity has meant a significant change in her life.

During the dry season, Ruda says, her family used to migrate to highlands in another district so their livestock could have better access to water. But the temporary move meant that her children couldn't attend school. Now, drinking troughs and a pond filled regularly provide water for the animals, allowing her family to stay put all year. And the nearby taps, along with bathing stalls and concrete laundry stands, are sparing her the time-consuming chore of porting water home from far away.

Ruda has put that extra time to good use: She has planted a patch of sugarcane, and with the first harvest earned about 500 birr—or \$30. Recently, she added green peppers to her plot, which brought in an extra 100 birr in July. She used the money to buy clothes for her children, she says, adding she'd also like to increase the number of cattle her family owns—and then expand her sugarcane operation.

For Shuri Dugo, who is now 17, the difficulty in accessing water meant humiliation during her first experience with school. Washing when the water was an hour's walk away was a challenge and her teach-

ers would single her out and ask why she wasn't keeping herself clean. They didn't understand her situation she says. But her brother did. He was in high school at the time, and he would accompany her when she needed to go to the the spring on weekends to wash herself and her clothes.

The youngest of 10 children—all boys except for her—Dugo says at first her parents were wary about sending her to school and the social dangers it might expose her to. But two of her brothers, both in school themselves, strongly supported the idea; now she has completed 10th grade and is waiting for results on the national exams she took. Her hope is to go to university and study to become a nurse, a prospect that delights her parents today.

Having water run near her family's home has made all of this easier, adds Dugo. Her mother no longer needs her help fetching it: She can manage it on her own, allowing Dugo to concentrate on her studies. Early on, she says, she used to miss the afternoon sessions at school because she was too busy lugging water home for her family.

Below: Clean water from neighborhood taps is one of the best benefits of the new water delivery system in Birkitu. Before the system was built, villagers would walk for miles to reach a spring, sharing the water with their animals and, consequently, often getting sick.  
*Eva-Lotta Jansson / Oxfam America*



Time isn't the only thing the water project has brought to the families of Birkitu. Better health has been a key benefit.

Jibo Waqo says the water her family used to drink—carted home on donkeys—was dirty, and her family suffered.

"During that time, my children were sick frequently with diarrhea," she says. "Now, no problem with disease."

In fact, says Mokona, the water committee member, Birkitu residents are so keen on the quality of their water that when they visit in neighboring communities they are leery of drinking the water there for fear it's not safe.

And during times of water shortages in a small city nearby, even rich people there will come to Birkitu—in their cars—to fill up jugs to bring home, adds Adola Gameda, a supervisor for Action for Development.

### A place to drink

Large, angular ponds—like massive swimming pools—are a central feature of the Birkitu water system. Designed specifically to help herds of cattle, sheep, and goats drink efficiently, there are three of them placed along the network, with long troughs jutting off the end of each.

On an early afternoon, animals stream across the flatlands, their herders driving them toward one of the ponds. Mooing, baaing, and bleating fill the air, along with the splash of water and the song of a team of men passing full buckets from the pond to fill the drinking troughs. Perched on concrete steps in the pond, they sing to set up a rhythm, making the work flow smoothly. This is part of the traditional water management system, a simple and reliable way of filling the troughs: There are no pumps that can break down and no expensive repairs to worry about.

Self-governance is also an important component: An *abbaa herregaa*—a person elected from the community for a specified amount of time—ensures the equitable distribution of water for both animals and people. At the troughs, for instance, an *abbaa herregaa* collects the water fees from families and organizes the times at which they can bring their livestock to drink.

"These traditional systems are still intact and are playing key roles in the efficient and

sustainable use of water resources," says Oxfam's Koji.

Before the system was built, newborn animals struggled to live because water was too far away, says Tondha Waji, a herder. His family would trek three hours each way to bring water home for themselves and the baby animals. Sometimes the calves, kids, and lambs just couldn't survive on the limited amount available to them.

Now, says Waji, all that has changed. Water is nearby, allowing his herd to get what it needs to stay strong and healthy—and freeing up a great deal more time for his family.

"Before this project, you wouldn't find anyone here," he says, scanning the family compound early one morning as it hummed with relatives milking cows and chipping dried corn kernels off their cobs. They would all have been hiking to the spring to collect water.

### Water for crops, too

For 150 households, the project has also meant water for their crops: An improved irrigation system is bringing bounty to nearly 125 acres of fields.

In the beginning, says Koji, few people were interested in the irrigation: Water for families and animals was top on their minds. But after they realized its advantages, people began clamoring for irrigation—even asking if they could pump water from the livestock ponds into their fields. Community members and local government together decided how to divvy up the irrigated land, he adds.

Dire Mokona's family is one of the lucky ones. The irrigation has helped improve the regularity of their food supply—and provided them with crops, like sugarcane, for sale. This year, she calculates the cash crops—including papaya and cabbages—earned her family about 7,000 birr, or \$420.

Raking the dirt aside to open the channel and let the water flow through, Dida Ture,

Mokona's son, says that the water committee has allotted his family five hours of water once a week for their field. It's not quite enough, he adds, but it's a great deal better than once a month, which is what was available before.

### What's next?

For all the benefits that the water project has brought to their lives, Birkitu families must pay a fee of 20 birr, or about \$1.20 a year to help cover the cost of keeping the system running. But members of the water committee worry that it's not enough, especially if there's a costly break. They are considering doubling the fee—to 40 birr, roughly the price of a big chicken.

Could families in this impoverished region afford that much?

"We can't live without water," says committee member Danbi Mokona, adding that he would like to see a reserve fund built up to pay for ongoing maintenance so that the system can be passed on—intact—to the next generation.

And even if families had to pay an annual fee of 100 birr, the water—and all that it has done for them—would be worth every cent, adds Gedacha Helu, chairman of the local administrative body.

To ensure the system's longevity, the project included ground-up training for three caretakers—men who participated in every phase of its development and now have the know-how to make the regular repairs it requires.

"As a caretaker, we worked like the project people and learned from the engineers," says Dembi Shebere, team leader for the caretakers. "We know everything to maintain." And it's a big responsibility, he adds.

"If a water point gets damaged, it will be a big problem for the households," Shebere says. "This water is important for day-to-day health...it's like we're born again."



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To learn more about the link between poverty and access to water, go to [oxfamamerica.org/water/background](http://oxfamamerica.org/water/background).

# Feeding our own

Oxfam's **Anna Kramer** reports on a Haitian farmer and community leader who has helped rural farmers, not only to get ahead, but to feed other Haitian families in need.

Jacqueline Morette has three strikes against her, said the University of Miami professor who introduced the visitor from Haiti during a community event in October. She's an *agricultrice*, a farmer. She's a woman. And she's a community leader.

In rural Haiti, he said, none of those are easy things to be.

Yet despite the challenges, Morette—who runs the Oxfam partner organization, the United Women's Association of Pouillé—has achieved remarkable results. In a region where most people farm but few earn a decent living, her group helps farmers improve their incomes. In a society where women's lives are constrained by rigid gender roles, she helps rural women gain greater autonomy. And in a country still reeling from a devastating earthquake and a recent cholera epidemic, her work demonstrates the power and ingenuity of homegrown solutions.

## The farmers' trap

When Morette spoke at America's largest Haitian church, in Miami, she began by talking about the importance of the farm—a familiar subject to the Haitian diaspora, many of whom come from rural areas.

"Farming is an occupation that I discovered while growing up," said Morette of her hometown, Pouillé, in central Haiti. "There was no training ... it was naturally a part of our lives."

Morette said nine out of ten Haitian departments, or regions, rely on farming. So with agriculture so vital to the country's economy, you'd think that growers would be prospering.

Not so, she said soberly. In fact, "most people are living in very hard poverty."

She explained that arable land is scarce, so most farmers' plots measure only a few acres. Rainfall is unpredictable. Irrigation systems are often non-existent or deteriorating. And with few machines, planting and harvesting is done by hand—a slow, laborious process.

Once crops are harvested, selling them poses another obstacle. Poorly maintained roads mean that a journey to the nearest market could take hours or even days. Fluctuating food prices—caused in part by low-cost imported products, like rice—mean that farmers might not get a fair price that day. But with few storage options, food can spoil quickly, so they don't have the luxury of waiting.

Hence what Morette calls the trap of subsistence farming—growing just enough so you don't starve, but not earning enough to escape poverty. "If you cannot earn an income," she said, "you cannot go forward."

She also noted the gender gap in rural Haiti. Women not only farm alongside their husbands, but also fetch water, cook, and care for the home and children. Traditionally, men control the household spending, and women have few chances to earn money of their own.

"The situation created a high level of frustration among the women, giving them a sense that they [didn't] have any value," said Morette. "So that was one reason we created this organization: to allow women to gain their autonomy."

## The power of "transformation"

Ten local women, including Morette, founded the United Women's Association of Pouillé as a community lending group.

**Right:** Jacqueline Morette walks through the cornfields during a visit to Neher Acres, a 500-acre corn and soybean farm in Grundy Center, Iowa. After speaking at the World Food Prize Symposium in Des Moines in October, Morette joined a group of international farmers for a hands-on tour of Iowa farms, which she said helped her learn new techniques that could be adapted for use in rural Haiti. *Sarah Peck / Oxfam America*

In 2002, they decided to expand their activities to agriculture.

The group focused on a technique known in Kreyol as *transformasyon* (literally, “transformation”), or value-added processing. Women grow small plots of crops like corn, peppers, and fruit. If the crops don’t sell, or if prices at the market are low, they use the group’s equipment to transform their harvest into other, more-marketable products. Peanuts might become peanut butter, fruits like pineapple become jams or juices, corn

After the January 2010 earthquake, Morette’s group sold peanut butter and cornmeal to Oxfam, which used the food for a larger humanitarian response that reached an estimated 10,000 families who survived the disaster. It was part of an ongoing effort to purchase food aid locally in Haiti instead of importing it from overseas.



becomes cornmeal. All can be preserved to prevent spoilage—and all fetch higher prices, which allows the women to earn a consistent profit. Oxfam supports Morette’s group by funding equipment and training and by organizing sellers’ fairs where they can advertise their products.

Meanwhile, the women’s new earnings are helping to close the gender gap in Pouillé. “The men began to see that the women could create opportunities,” said Morette. “They realized that if they worked together with women, their family lives could improve.”

Haiti’s catastrophic earthquake in January 2010 did not reach Pouillé, but the area has been deeply affected by the quake. Like many rural Haitians, residents took in friends and relatives who’d fled Port-au-Prince after the earthquake. As a result, said Morette, local families had to use up some of seeds they were saving for next year’s harvest—not for planting, but to feed hungry people. “Everyone was willing to lend a hand,” she said, shrugging off the hardship.

But it was the transformation process that gave the women a way to help people beyond their community. After the quake, they

sold peanut butter and cornmeal to Oxfam, which used the food for a larger humanitarian response that reached an estimated 10,000 families who survived the disaster. It was part of an ongoing effort to purchase food aid locally in Haiti instead of importing it from overseas.

#### A voice for dignity

In October 2010, Oxfam America sponsored Morette’s first visit to the US. She toured the country, speaking to agriculture experts at the World Food Prize Symposium in Iowa, humanitarian aid workers in Washington, DC, and Haitian diaspora leaders in Florida.

When asked what changes she’d like to see from the Haitian government, Morette’s answer was straightforward and specific: “Modernize the agricultural sector, improve

infrastructure, and make sure these improvements reach rural people.” She called on aid groups to invest more in Haitian farmers and praised Oxfam for bringing farmers’ voices like hers to the halls of power.

At Notre Dame D’Haiti in Miami, Morette called on 8,000 churchgoers to use their influence to make sure rural people benefit from the recovery effort. “The diaspora has a critical role to play in Haiti’s reconstruction,” she said to resounding applause.

“Haiti is a country that wants to develop,” Morette said when asked what message she wanted to send Americans about her home country. “We do need the assistance of the US—but it’s an assistance that I want to see in partnership, so that Haitians can live in dignity.”



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To learn about Oxfam’s efforts to elevate farmers’ voices from around the world, go to [oxfamamerica.org/feedtheworld](http://oxfamamerica.org/feedtheworld).



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