

Sisal Initiative - Ethiopia

Villagers in Ethiopia are under the constant threat of drought conditions, and in many places they are starving. While Morrell Agro Industries is working to combat this, through dry farms and introducing alternative food sources, the process will require some patience, as it is transforming a way of thinking and living. Simply handing these good Ethiopian people food and money was not the answer. Lloyd Ward wanted to find a way to assist them, without perpetuating the cycle of receiving help, without work, and then going hungry again, repeated over and over.

Lloyd sought to help Ethiopians help themselves by identifying local resources that can be bought and marketed in Ethiopia. In this system, a locally acquired resource could be bought from the villagers, so they can have money, or traded, so they can have food. A plant called sisal seemed to show promise as just such a resource that could be used to make a profit.

Sisal is a plant in the same order as aloe vera. It resembles a huge aloe vera plant, with very coarse leaves that are pointy on the ends, and it can grow to be six feet tall. It produces a stiff fiber that is used for fiber in various products, such as rope, twine, carpet, floor mats, and bags. It grows in Ethiopia, and it could be harvested and collected by local people. There is a need for these products in Ethiopia, and there is a market for sisal in Addis, so it would follow that other local people could benefit from the harvesting of the plant, as well. This would be a great opportunity to create a more industrious people with hope for the future.



Sisal

Sisal factories in Addis Ababa process the fibers that come from the plant. They have to import all of the fibers from other African countries, such as Uganda, even though Ethiopia is full of the product. The rich soils in the country create a wonderful growing environment. Sisal should grow in the Ethiopia just as well as in the rest of Africa, and yet no local people are harvesting sisal or turning it into fibers. The Ethiopian sisal factories are anxious to see if MAI can find a way for them to gain access to local sisal plants and fibers.

Mike Rhodes has also been working on the development of a sisal initiative for MAI in Ethiopia. They are currently in the process of doing trial runs on extracting the native sisal. Sisal fibers can be used for carpet, building, rope, twine, and other products. The goal of this initiative is to get the local people to harvest and process the sisal plant by themselves. They can then sell the fibers and have the money to provide for themselves in times when crop harvests are slim or nonexistent. A mill in Addis Ababa will buy all of the sisal that they can produce.

Progress on the MAI sisal initiative has been slow. Mekonen Geteneh, along with Lloyd Ward and Mike Rhodes, has been testing the economic possibilities of the sisal plant for local Ethiopian farmers. Mekonen bought sisal leaves from the farmers and then paid them to manually extract the fiber from the sisal plant.

MAI found that they had paid the farmers too much. After the fiber was sold, they determined that it was not going to be a cost effective project to do by hand. Manufacturing sisal fiber is a profitable venture in neighboring countries, even with higher labor costs, so the possibility exists for Ethiopia, as well.

Lloyd said, “We’re not giving up on sisal. We feel it will work, but we need to not pay more for the leaves than we can get for the fiber.”

MAI has experimented two or three different ways to try and make sisal economically viable, and although progress has been slow, they now have valuable information, such as what doesn’t work. If it can be learned how to harvest the leaves in an economical manner, the fiber in the leaves can be sold and potentially be a cash crop for the local people.

After testing the sisal plant in Ethiopia, Mekonen was able to get 3% fiber from the sisal leaves, which is the same amount that the government in the country has been getting. Throughout the world, in South America and Africa, where they grow sisal for fiber, the average is 3-4% fiber. So, MAI has been manufacturing the product successfully, the project just needs to be fine tuned.

Ideally in August or September, when the local farmers in Ethiopia are running out of food and their harvest is still two months away, MAI can tell the people to go and gather sisal. They would then be paid for it. Instead of just being offered free food, they will be able to take care of themselves.

Abera Chala, a local employee of MAI in Ethiopia, paid his way through school during if his early teen years by utilizing sisal. He would use sisal fibers to make a rope, which he would sell for 20 burr. While many people in Ethiopia are not as ambitious or hardworking as Abera, he may be able to show MAI staff members how to make ropes from sisal. His skills and ideas could be passed on to villagers on the verge of famine.

When asked about the sisal project, Marty Petersen said, “If [the project] works, [it] would help the Ethiopian people. The format is to help [many] individual farmers grow this. Then we would provide them with not just seeds, but also expertise and know-how on producing it. Basically helping them become more self-sufficient. I think that there’s a lot of benefit that can come from that.”

While recently in Ethiopia, Evan Maxfield toured a few sisal factories and sisal plantations. In the past, the Ethiopian government was running some sisal operations, but they abandoned everything and are now importing sisal from other countries. Evan observed that there must be reason that they got out of the business, whether it was mismanagement or something else. Touring these factories and plantations will help MAI employees decide the feasibility of a company sisal initiative.

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