

Visit to Nekemte, November 2018

We arrived in Addis Ababa airport in the early morning to the warmth and chaos of a new day in Ethiopia. Our 8 hour journey by road took us West towards Nekemte, firstly through the sprawling suburbs then out into the rural areas. Long straight roads built by the Chinese gave way to dusty, potholed tracks, leading us eventually to our base in Nekemte.

As the week unfolded we soon became accustomed to being a local curiosity, as this part of Ethiopia is not on the tourist route. It was wonderful to meet the EEL team at DASSC, our local partners, and to visit schools, checking the progress of the reading centres and school libraries and meeting the dedicated staff who run them, often in very difficult conditions.

These visits opened our eyes to the challenging conditions, where in some schools one teacher copes with 75 pupils in a crowded, dark hut sharing a few slate boards. Resources are certainly scarce. But the libraries are beginning to offer pupils the chance to extend their learning independently and the new loan schemes provide opportunity to take books home and promote private study. More age appropriate books are badly needed and we were able to take out three suitcases full of reading schemes, donated by Devon schools, which will hopefully provide a more structured approach to learning phonics.

Younger pupils have the chance to learn to read by taking part in two lessons per week in a reading centre, one in their native Afan Oromo and one in English. It was heartening to see colourful mats on the floor and posters on the walls to bring language to life. Pupils were putting to good use the Mini Books, made by the deaf students as part of their income-generating project, which depicted phonics and local folk tales.

One of the most successful projects is the linking between schools in and around Nekemte with 14 Devon primary schools. The children exchange work on mutually agreed topics, such as food, transport or growing crops. In this way, so much can be learned from peer to peer on a personal level, as well as this work providing an ongoing library of factual resources.

'Ongoing' and 'sustainable' are words frequently used in development work. EEL may provide the initial start up funds but our ultimate aim is for communities to be able to gain momentum with their projects for the future. At one rural Savings and Loans Scheme meeting, sitting out in the sunshine, we really enjoyed hearing how the community had expanded their own enterprise, paying back their initial loans into the scheme and enabling others to take part. An impassioned speech was made in English by one of the elders stating, "We do not want to be beggars, we want to learn skills." One local school has shown enterprise by using a brick-making machine, funded by their link school, and operated by students and volunteers, not only to build their own library but to sell on the additional bricks to generate funds. These examples of good practice were inspiring.

We were so glad to have made our first visit to Ethiopia and seen, touched and tasted the reality of EEL's work for ourselves. We left knowing there is plenty more to achieve, but also recognising that the sound basic foundations are in place. Perhaps the essence is captured in the Chinese proverb: *"Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime."*