

## Lessons from Ethiopia

WE publish in this issue a report by an Oxfam-sponsored team on what can be learnt from the Ethiopian drought of last year. This is very much a first-hand report. Mr Mason and colleagues were in the area for much of the critical time last autumn when relief efforts, including their own, were turning the tide of fatalities. They are too modest about the success of the high energy food devised at Cambridge which undoubtedly brought many children back to health from the verge of death, but the greater achievement of this group and of many other devoted workers will come if their clearly spelt out recommendations are taken seriously and acted upon. It is at least highly encouraging that they report that a framework for relief can be based on established principles. An exotic or technologically complex solution is the last thing needed.

What is the prospect for 1974? Ethiopia has two harvests the first of which comes after the light spring rains. The failure of these last year led to the crisis; this year they seem to be much better in general, although the lack of seed and oxen will ensure that the harvest is small. In addition some first results from longer term aid will soon begin to prove their worth—road building and irrigation projects have made some progress. Nevertheless there are some fearfully large problems remaining. Perhaps the greatest of these is information flow.

Everybody one speaks to about Ethiopia (and this is hardly just an Ethiopian problem, although it is particularly severe there) is concerned about the lack of data. This was epitomised recently by the conflict between a Norwegian missionary's report that the south of the country was then in distress and a BBC reporter's failure to find any such situation. It is clearly inadequate that the forays of individual journalists should form the basis on which the world is alerted, and the solution is not one which poses vast technical problems, although it may well pose political ones. The sort of monitoring that nutritionists would like to see, the sort of information that would give adequate meteorological coverage, the sort of human animal and crop statistics that would give early warning of danger are such that a trained village postmaster could provide in many countries. Of course, there are no such people as yet in Ethiopia, nor are there means of communication. But it is surely not beyond the wit of a country that runs its own airline and uses computers in government to devise a suitable permanent reporting scheme. Surely in this it would have the support of international relief agencies.

Another widely mentioned obstacle to long term progress is the problem of land use and tenure. Much of

Ethiopia's fertile land is heavily overfarmed, largely because it is parcelled up into uneconomically small units, many of which are rented out at extraordinarily high rents. Often more than 50% of the produce from this land goes in rents. The Emperor and his family, it is said, own nearly half the land in Ethiopia, and the Church a further quarter. Clearly no rational approach towards self help can ignore this source of much harm. This is one of the issues behind recent political agitations in Addis Ababa and it is difficult to see it going away spontaneously. It is to be hoped that foreign aid-giving bodies with political clout will continue to raise this matter whenever future aid is being discussed.

And what lessons are there for the aid-giving bodies themselves? It has been alarming to learn that the disaster which only broke on the world in October 1973 was known as early as April 1973 to many people who were constrained by political sensitivities to respond in a low key way. It was by no means only those in the Ethiopian government who knew, although it seems that it was they who through ignorance or touchiness underplayed the expected scale of the disaster. Nevertheless the prospect of the tragedy was known in Britain in April and even without the starkness of Mr Dimbleby's television programme, it would surely have been possible to mobilise much financial and logistic support months earlier. One has great hopes that Mrs Judith Hart, the new British Minister for Overseas Development, will look very carefully at this question. She comes to the ministry with a good reputation and a burning conviction.

She might also with profit look carefully at the ways that other countries handle aid in the field. There are tricky problems of liaison and collaboration between government and private agencies. Some have spoken well of the German approach to the operation. It is clearly a field in which all can still learn much and, one hopes, can learn quickly and without worrying about loss of face and demarcation of duties.

### 100 years ago



THE Chair of Chemistry in the University of Glasgow is vacant. We hope the Home Secretary in filling up the vacancy will, in the spirit which urged the late Mr. Langworthy to make the magnificent bequest above referred to, show by the appointment he makes the appreciation in which he holds original research. It is now high time that it should be distinctly understood that no man deserves to be appointed to a Chair of Science in any of our Universities unless he has shown that he has that knowledge of his subject which can only come from original investigation.

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