

December 2000 Vol.16-4  
**Ecologisation of monoculture**

How can monocropping systems and monolivestock systems be made more sustainable? Can they be transformed into integrated systems? How can the quality of the production chain be improved? Articles are invited on interesting examples of: ecological intensification and diversification of mono-cropping; integrated soil fertility management; ecological pest management; product development, adding value to and marketing new products.

**Deadline for contributions 15 September 2000.**

March 2001 Vol.17-1  
**Resilience of agriculture**

How do farmers prevent disaster and react to the catastrophes of drought, flood, armed conflict, disease and economic crisis? How do farmers deal with variability and risk? How can the resilience of farming and rural livelihoods be improved? What impact does labour migration have on farming systems and gender roles? How can women best adapt farming in areas of labour migration and still optimise benefits and ecological sustainability? How can gender roles be renegotiated? How can women farmers best be reached and supported? How can farming by refugees be supported?

**Deadline for contributions 1 December 2000.**

*You are invited to contribute to these issues with articles (about 1800 words + 2 illustrations), suggest possible authors, and send us information about interesting issues, publications, training courses, meetings and websites.*



*The challenge ahead will be to bring researchers, development agents and women innovators together to explore new ways*

Photo: Fetien Abay

## Women challenge cultural norms

Mamusha Lemma, Fetien Abay and Ann Waters-Bayer

**T**ensue Gebre-Medhin is a 30-year-old woman who farms at an altitude of some 1500 m in Central Tigray, Ethiopia. Annual rainfall is about 650 mm and falls mainly between May and August. She has 5 dependants and about 1 ha of land on which she grows sorghum, teff, maize and barley.

Ploughing with two oxen is a centuries-old tradition in Ethiopia, but has always been the domain of men. In 1981 the agricultural section of the TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front) trained Tensue in oxen ploughing. While her husband was still alive, she did not have the chance to apply what she had learned. After his death she had only one ox and followed the tradition of sharecropping with a man who also owned an ox. This meant she had to give half her harvest to the man. Moreover, for every two days the man ploughed his land, he ploughed only one day on hers.

### A donkey-ox draught team

Tensue therefore decided to plough by herself. Her father was not happy to see her do this, because it was against the local culture. Nevertheless, he complied with her request to lend her a donkey to pair with her ox. In addition to breaking the taboo against women ploughing, Tensue thus introduced the idea of a donkey-ox draught team. This was a new system in the area, but she saw certain advantages. Oxen cost at least three times more than donkeys to buy. Donkeys are easier to manage and can live on poorer-quality feed. A donkey can be used as a pack animal to generate income by carrying goods to different markets for petty trading.

In her innovation, Tensue encountered some technical problems but found her own solutions. A donkey has no hump and is smaller than an ox. To keep the yoke in balance and to fix it securely, she put a pile of old rugs over the donkey's neck. The rugs also prevent the donkey being injured by the rubbing yoke. Another problem was that the two species do not understand the

same commands. She therefore had to use different words when speaking to the donkey and the ox.

### Growing acceptance

When Tensue started ploughing, many people laughed at her and some cursed her, calling her an evil wisher. Because the practice had not come from the ancestors, many villagers criticised Tensue. However, the local development agent defended and encouraged her. Confident in the value of her innovation, Tensue continued practising it, despite what others said. Last year, some women asked Tensue to train them to plough. She has even been asked to plough the land of families whose men have gone to war. The community is starting to accept her as a farmer and innovator in her own right.

### Potential for poorer households

Women's innovations often indicate how local resources can be used more intensively, especially by poorer households. In addition to spreading women's innovations and encouraging others to innovate, researchers and DAs could help women improve and spread their innovations. In Tensue's case, researchers could help develop appropriate implements and equipment for donkey traction. DAs could stimulate community discussion about the pros and cons of ploughing with a pair of donkeys, a mixed donkey-ox team or a pair of oxen.

The challenge ahead will be to bring researchers, DAs and women innovators together to explore further the avenues that women are already opening up for the development of smallholder farming in marginal areas.

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