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## Farm Africa: the women digging their daughters' future

Rosie Boycott travels to Kenya with thirteen female senior executives from the UK food world, to help create a fishpond that will change women's lives.



In the muck together: Farm Africa volunteers with local women at the pond they dug to hold tilapia fish, which will provide an income Photo: Farm Africa/Sue Parkhill

By Rosie Boycott

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1 Comment

"The beef is at the slaughterhouse, it will be 20 minutes." Not something you hear every day, but then it's not every day that one is charged with preparing a feast for 20 African women, assorted villagers, children and a handful of male village elders, all to be dished up in a remote corner of western Kenya. It was the last night of our sponsored fish pond dig for the charity Farm Africa and the idea was that we, the British contingent, would knock up an English feast. After much debate we'd agreed on shepherd's pie and trifle. All was going well until, late into the evening before, we had still failed to find any beef.

We were celebrating the fact that we had succeeded in digging a 20m x 15m fish pond, located in the heart of lush African farm land. The rich, red soil was bursting with cassava, corn, sweet potatoes, green beans, banana palms and myriad wild flowers on which exotic butterflies fed.

There were 14 of us on the dig, all women and all working in the food industry. I'm the chair of the London Food Board; Judith Bachelor, a trustee of the charity Farm Africa and our expedition leader, is director of brand for Sainsbury's. We had barely met each other before we found ourselves boarding the plane at Heathrow, with three and a half days to dig the pond. I thought it sounded straightforward. Hah.

The pond would be owned by a collective of African women farmers, who would be digging alongside us, and supported by Farm Africa's Aquaculture project, which would stock it with 1,200 baby tilapia, supply fish food during the nine months it took the fish to grow and then help to harvest the pond, clean it, re-lime it and start all over again.

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Tilapia are tough little fish. They're easy to rear, relatively disease resistant and they provide an excellent source of affordable protein. Our pond will deliver a harvest of 400kg of fish, which, after the costs of stock and feed, will make £500 for the group.

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Our days started at 6am with breakfast at our hotel, a faux grand building in the town of Bumala. What it lacked in amenities, The Western Ambience hotel made up for in the charm of its management who took this batty group of English women to their hearts. Every day, when we arrived back covered in mud, they'd carry our boots to a separate room. They cleaned our clothes. They allowed us the run of the kitchen, and every day they would stagger down to the pond with our lunch (hot, amazingly).

On our first day, following an elaborate arrival ceremony, we walked the mile or so to the bottom of the valley where a small stream flowed. The area of the pond had been pegged out with various coloured lengths of string. We divided up into groups, selected either a spade or a jembe, and set to. A jembe is an African hoe, essentially a spade set at right angles at the end of a long handle, which you lifted over your head and thwacked down into the earth. If you were nifty, you'd lift a big scoop of earth away in a single, clean movement and deposit it on a rice sack, which two women would then haul away. Needless to say, our new African friends did this effortlessly. As we floundered away, the earth turning into a soggy quagmire with every inch we went down, mud seemed to be everywhere. The African women, who dug wearing wonderful coloured skirts and tops, unfathomably always avoided it, ending their days pretty much as neat and tidy as they had begun them. We, on the other hand, looked like a strange breed of troglodytes.

The system was simple: one person dug, heaving the soggy wet soil onto the rice sacks, which two colleagues would cart to the side to deposit on the banks. So we were going down and we were building up. When a good layer of earth had been dumped on the banks, we'd break off and do a "compacting dance" which involved shuffling, hopping and jumping up and down while singing as loudly as possible. The main song's chorus was "dala sangala" which roughly translates to, "I should be happy so that you can be happy, as I am the owner of this home". By day three, a giant radio had appeared under the mango tree, walloping out the local radio station.

It was incredibly hard work. The temperature was in the high 80s and the humidity oppressive. I was drinking around 10 to 12 small bottles of water a day.

The women had arranged for us to use the "long drop" in a nearby village. It stood next to the village distillery, a small thatched hut where the men brewed cassava liquor. Passing it one day, I heard unmistakable belches coming from the shadowy interior.

Sadly, it is true that many African men do absolutely nothing. On the evening of the third day of the dig, when there was still rather a lot of earth to shift, some young men leapt in with us and started shovelling mud at a tremendous rate and with enormous staying power. But the older men just looked and when meals were served expected to either be brought food, or at least be allowed to go to the front of the queue. Watching this made me, and I think all of us, redouble our efforts on behalf of our women. Some years ago, I had the privilege to meet Wangaari Maathi, the Nobel Prize winning Kenyan activist who founded the Green Belt movement, which aimed to reforest farming areas that had been destroyed by over-ambitious timber felling. "I only give trees to women – the men just

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take them to market and sell them," she told me. "And it is our women who will save the money earned from rearing and selling tilapia, and will enable their daughters to escape the poverty."

Even though the fields we walked through to get to the pond were lush and fertile, life for women is one of subsistence. When they have fed their families there is nothing left.

Everline, secretary of her collective, juggles farming with her job as a dressmaker. She was orphaned young but an enlightened cousin supported her to study. The week after our visit she would have to pay four sets of university fees and school fees for her children: that adds up to 64,000 Kenyan shillings, around £500. "You have to engage in small jobs here and there and put aside money for school. Sometimes we go hungry because it is too shameful to have a child sent home because his family can't pay the fees," she told me. Often, young girls have to stay home from school when they have their periods because they do not have enough money for sanitary protection.

All the women we dug alongside plan to send their daughters and sons to further education. Charity, the 19-year-old daughter of a member of the collective, told me she wants to be a journalist. Others wanted to be doctors, biologists, entrepreneurs.

We finished the pond on the fourth day.

The feast was planned for the last night. On the night before, three of us set off for Basia, a town on the Uganda border which had a supermarket. The first realisation was that there is no jelly to be found in rural Africa. The trifle, thus, became a concoction of sponge cake, strawberry jam, fresh pineapples and a huge amount of bright yellow custard. We bought spuds, carrots, onions, tomatoes and in the hotel after supper all of us set to, peeling and chopping. All was in order, except for the meat.

"At the slaughterhouse?" I asked nervously. "Yes... very fresh," came the answer. Shortly afterwards, a huge chunk of glistening beef was brought into the kitchen. A few hours later, the pies and trifles were being shared out among around 80 people. We danced, sang, and nursed our aching muscles, and all agreed we would be back next year.

## Farm Africa

Farm Africa believes that Africa's farmers can feed Africa's people. It provides solutions before hunger becomes an emergency, investing in farmers to give them the tools and skills they need to feed their families. It also trains farmers' groups in how to market and sell what they farm so their families see change for years to come.

To help more farmers beat hunger for good, please visit [Farm Africa](#).

**Farm Africa is a member of the Enough Food for Everyone IF campaign: [Enough Food If](#)**



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