

Blog 2018: Kenya (and not only its farming)

The entries below appeared in slightly different form on the dates given. Any mistakes are mine. The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Syngenta Foundation.

Nation of assymetry?

Castle's Kenya Collection (1)

The Syngenta Foundation has been working in [Kenya](#) for about a decade. So far, I've only been for short visits, for example to meet some of the [radio stations](#) with which we work. This time, I'm here for two months and a varied program. My "Kenya Collection" is a grand name for the accompanying blog.

One of the many great things about Kenya (and there are MANY) is the country's love of agriculture. That's understandable, given the sector's crucial role in the economy. But one of its signs is one I'd love to see elsewhere: weekly farming supplements in leading newspapers. Wouldn't it be wonderful if European media, for example, had those as well, instead of joining in their governments' efforts to shoot national farming in the foot?

Fortunately, coverage of agriculture isn't limited to Saturdays. So hardly had I arrived than I opened my favorite Kenyan paper and saw a cow. Nothing special about that, perhaps – but this cow was standing on a mountain of tomatoes. Rotting tomatoes. Rotting vitamins that could be benefiting farmers in Kenya and consumers across this great horticultural nation and beyond.

How is this possible?

That's what I asked my colleague Ian Barker. He suspects a lot of the answer is "assymetry of information". And Ian ought to know. He's our Foundation's Head of Agricultural Partnerships. He also used to live in Kenya, and now runs our [Seeds2B](#) program. This weekend he was also the star of *Seeds of Gold*, my favorite section in my favorite Kenyan paper.



Ian knows a thing or two about assymetry, and would like to end it. He can remember the irony of a big potato surplus in parts of Kenya while food was desperately short in the same nation's refugee camps. And like every long-term observer of the agricultural scene, Ian knows that other countries around the world have suffered similar problems.

So what does "assymetry" mean in this context? That buyer and seller aren't properly connected, for example. One doesn't know what the other has got, or needs, where, when, or at what price. As my favorite Kenyan newspaper wrote next to the cow's hindquarters: "Farmers lack market for produce". That's a frequent problem for smallholders, and one we and partners are tackling in several ways.

In Kenya, the problem of skewed markets has been made worse by recent torrential rain. Flooding has not only destroyed lives and homes, but also washed away bridges and made roads impassable. So tomatoes can't get to any kind of market, skewed or not, and soon rot in the fields.

Flooding is another "assymetry" topic, by the way. In much of Kenya, the weather has long been lopsided in the other direction: Drought has plagued farmers, in addition to [Fall Armyworm](#). And now the rains have come at last – but as one reader wrote to the *Daily Nation* (ok, so now you know my [favorite paper](#); I'll try and talk about a different one next time!): "What should have been a long-awaited blessing has become a curse". Instead of boosting crops, the rain's destroying them. Bizarrely, however, the also flooded capital, Nairobi, is short of water. Not empty-pipes-Cape-Townily short of water, but with far less available than required, and for the next few years. How assymetric is that?

But there are some assymetries in which Kenya is on the right end of the scales. Another of the MANY wonderful things about life here is the ease of mobile technology use. In the middle of rural Kenya, miles from the nearest town, the cellphone signal is better than on the outskirts of Basel, Switzerland. And although Switzerland is one of the richest countries in the world, it's nowhere yet, compared with Kenya, on phone payments in shops – or easy Uber use, for that matter. Signing up for [M-Pesa](#) mobile payment on arrival here took three minutes. And everybody accepts it, for any (legal) daily transaction you can think of.

(Don't want to pick on Switzerland here, btw: Germany and other places are just as backward!).

I have to admit that the *Nation* is not immune to assymetry itself. Its sports pages, typically Kenyan, sadly devote more column inches to England's Premier League than to local soccer teams. (Or, indeed, to the country's great Rugby 7's team, who recently wiped the floor with France and the USA).

Now, I've heard a rumor that some local Syngenta Foundation employees are also more interested in Arsenal than AFC Leopards or Mathare United. But happier reading for them than any football results must be the interview with Ian Barker in that *Seeds of Gold* farming supplement.

And if you think half a right-hand page on seeds might represent a bit of assymetry engineered by USAID, let me put your mind at rest: *Seeds of Gold* has eight pages. (Yes, every Saturday!) This week, the front story was on rearing insects for livestock feed. The inside showed London Marathon champion Mary Keitany feeding her (carefully registered) cows, quoted our friends at [ACRE](#) in a double spread on Fall Armyworm insurance, and explained the ins and outs (so to speak) of de-worming goats. And there was more besides.

So, dear *Times*, *Le Monde*, *FAZ*, *Dagens Nyheter*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *El País* and other European ag-nostics or ag-versaries: How about a *Seeds of Gold* equivalent, at least from time to time? Even asymmetric three pages would be better than none.

Symbolic green trio

Castle's Kenya Collection (2)

Nairobi is a very green city. Sure, not all office blocks would win a beauty contest. And sure, cars and beaten-up Matatu buses are everywhere. (Despite daily downpours, people here are always washing their cars. One driver said it's because a vehicle is like a second wife!) But nonetheless, Nairobi is a very green city. Take a look at G**** Maps if you don't believe me. Trees, grass and bushes abound.

And where there's flora, there's fauna.

At the smaller end of the spectrum, a rather fancy little chap (?) greets me every morning near the car park. He (?) is shiny green and blue, and cheeps and flutters. A bird, I'd say. My colleague Ian Barker (see first blog instalment) would know what it's called, but I don't. I also don't know the name of the large yellow butterfly who butterflits around nearby. But I do know a dog, a monkey and a goat when I see them. Our road has all three. And between them, they stand for a lot of daily life.

Take the monkeys first. Not a lot of those running about in Switzerland, although sometimes one takes day release from Basel zoo. In our road, however, they're kings of the electrical cables as well as the trees. And there are lots of both, because next to the road are the extensive grounds of a church, convent and school.



Our Regional Director George Osure (see also first blog instalment, but anonymously) played rugby here when he was a lad. Away games against the church school, and probably Sister Anabolica as referee. At the moment, the rugby pitches are under water. (Like a lot of Nairobi and, far more disastrously, many other parts of Kenya). But nuns have always had a good eye for real estate (ask my sister). Their convent grounds in central Nairobi must be worth a packet. And for the monkeys, they're a wonderful playground and larder.



Dogs next. (To my regret, cats don't get a look-in round here). These dogs are not strays, but commuters. That's funny, because in Basel, two-legged Alsatians also tend to be commuters. In Kenya, as in some other places, people call them German Shepherds. The one I've met seems to understand Swiss German, so perhaps that's why. They arrive by pick-up in the early evening, and leave, still barking, with the same chauffeurs at 6-ish each morning.

If the monkeys are symbolic of freedom and open African spaces, the dogs stand for a different side to Nairobi life. Security is BIG business here, with barbed wire around houses, body scanners at supermarkets (with good reason – remember the Westgate attack?) and uniformed staff at every gate. Rent-A-Hound is part of that business. Sad that it's necessary, but metropolitan life is like that in many countries.

Now to the goats. They appreciate the city greenery, and three of them seem to love the bushes down our road. I've heard it said that "in Kenya, everyone's a farmer". That wasn't referring to goats in

particular, nor to the major contribution of urban farming to Nairobi's greenness. True, the nuns next door cultivate a range of crops near their kindergarten, and as one moves around town, there always seems to be maize (i.e. corn) growing in every spare corner. But "everyone's a farmer" is more a tribute to most people's closeness – mental and/or physical – to agriculture. In contrast to sad Western Europe, for example, Kenyans have kept in touch with the land. So they continue to value food not just for taste, nutrition and conviviality, but also for all the hard work involved.

The proximity is often both mental and physical. I was reminded of that at a job interview this week. Our former rugby star George Osure is a master of personnel development. That includes keeping a permanent eye open for young talent, and offering appropriate opportunities. Syngenta Foundation internships are one such opening.

So in came a potential young intern. Very smart suit, slick business jargon, good credentials as an accountant. But where was the spark, the passion? As so often in job interviews, the key was life outside work. Forget accountancy – this applicant's eyes lit up when we got onto farming. And you've guessed it: The very smart suit has land out of town, and knows lots about growing maize and vegetables.

Try that test in London or Paris, next time your business consultants come round...

Nairobi, May 5th 2018

Business angels?

Castle's Kenya Collection (3)

My "Kenya Collection" is more ramble than blog. Farming and food make an appearance in most instalments. This is the third, but mentions neither. At least not in the usual sense.

Close your eyes. Think of seven old women, and a bachelor wearing something medieval. Then open your eyes and think again. Of hundreds of people in the same sized space, with men in snappy suits, ladies of all ages dressed to the nines, lots of singing and clapping, and loud multimedia fun.

One Sunday, two churches, 6000 kilometers apart. And the second, as you've probably guessed, is just down our road. It has several buildings and a generous car park, on a prime downtown site. (As noted last week: Religion and real estate are well-chosen fellows). *Wazungu* like I aren't supposed to walk there (some say), but lots of other people come on foot, too. Just as well, because with 15 minutes to kick-off, the muddy parking lot is already choc-a-bloc.

Apart from the vehicle logistics, the next few hours (!) offer numerous lessons for business events. Prepare for a professionally packaged product.

Guests are warmly welcomed, for example. First at the gate, by a genial Elder with a bulging white tie, and later indoors, with warm applause for first-time visitors. That's when CI-branded staff immediately provide introductory literature and a contact form.

This meeting doesn't start the way of many I know, with some madly exciting activity like reading out the agenda or adding a comma to previous minutes. Here, we're straight into the action – and everybody joins in. But if you're thinking gently swaying Big Mamas in a blue-robed choir, think again. This is rock band stuff, prancing lead singers, loudspeakers, filmed and transmitted to screens everyone can see. With karaoke texts for the uninitiated and musically handicapped (like me). Those teleprompters are back in use later for the Bible readings. The screens also feature a dramatic HSE film and slightly saucy look-ahead to the parish week.

The business doesn't stop there, either. Proceedings here are themed by the month, and there's regular reporting. The lecture slides on this church's "Vision 2040" would do credit to the London consultants I elbowed in last week's blog. And to ensure nobody misses out, there's a Big Mama up front (still no blue robe, though) translating the Vision, and everything else, into Kenya Sign Language. All this clearly pays off: The collection bags are so heavy that it takes two men to carry them backstage.

The preacher, when it's finally his turn, is wearing one of those snappy suits mentioned above, plus the kind of fine tie some of us nowadays miss in other business settings. He's also rhetorically excellent – all the story-telling skills for which Africans are rightly famous, mixed with the right level of fervour, and the kind of humour that stops him taking himself toooooo seriously. I must ask his advice on rowing commentary.



Don't get me wrong. Elderly bachelors wearing something medieval can be highly *medienwirksam*. Of all the recent Twitter stuff involving the Syngenta Foundation, the most liked and retweeted (by miles) was a picture of conference delegates posing with the Pope (or vice versa). But that's a bit like comparing Barack Obama's Social Media ratings with a Nebraskan sheriff's. Local priests tend to lack VIP appeal.

This Nairobi preacher, however, has it all. (But in the right quantity so as not to annoy). About two hours in, it was sermon time. Forgive me for not transcribing all his words – there were quite a lot of them. But, with the business flavour of the event in mind, I was intrigued by his frequent reference to angels. Angels as agents of instruction.

Now, you may be like ABBA (for example), and believe in angels. Or you may view scaring shepherds at Christmas as an unlikely profession. But instruction is pretty important. We all need it, so somebody's got to do it. From kindergarten teachers to flying instructors, and from parents to priests. Business Angels tend to do a bit more than just instruct, but are usually pretty good at that as well. And this singing, joking, multimedia, smart-tie preacher jumped way up my all-time Instructors' League. He closed the meeting with three take-home messages, and clear calls to action before next week. But instead of participants then shuffling off separately to the company canteen, or locking themselves in their offices, we all got a feet-tapping, hip-swaying send-off from the Gospel Girls.

Surprising? Perhaps not. After all, many Kenyan business meetings start with a prayer. And one prominent university runs a profitable mall, plus – slightly worryingly – a Funeral Home. Contemplation and commerce can be a clever combination.

Whatever: At three hours, this free (well, almost) instruction in how to run business events was top value. The only slightly sad things were the body scans on the church steps (see my recent Dog-Blog), and the fact that almost none of the service was in Swahili.

But I'll return to the topic of language another time.

Nairobi, May 12th 2018

(The photo was not taken at church, by the way!)

A wait off my mind

Castle's Kenya Collection (4)

When I was a junior pupil in uniform shorts (just like Kenyan schoolboys), we used to 'sing' "Why are we waiting?" every time teachers were late. (Unless we were pleased that none had come). One much-liked Latin master (*sic*) answered: "Because you choose to do so".

Those wise words came back to me this week. Done a lot of waiting recently, you see. As have others.

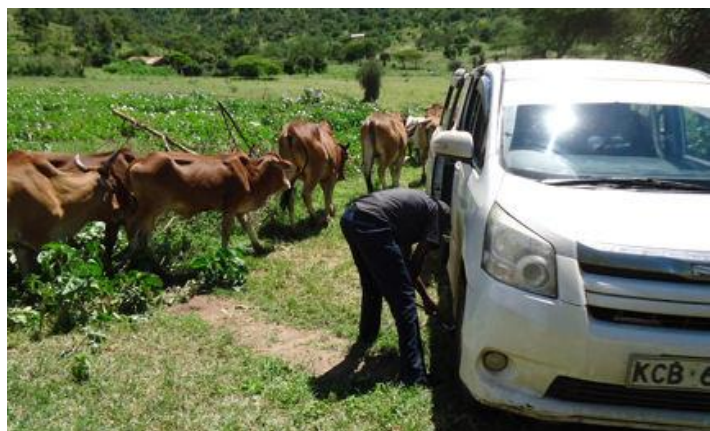
Some waiting is definitely choice, and well worthwhile. Like sitting in an empty cow-shelter before a new radio listening group convenes.

Listening groups are an important part of our work to build up [farm radio programmes](#) at small local-language stations. (I.e. not in Swahili or English). The farmer groups don't just listen, but also discuss, ask questions and then decide what advice they want to implement. This week, the local Agricultural Extension Officer (a long way of saying 'farm advisor') in Kajiado was starting a second group for Massai semi-pastoralists (a short way of saying 'people who love their traditional grazing livestock, but nowadays also grow beans, maize and other crops, on which they greatly welcome advice'). The cow-pergola is fairly near the wonderful radio station BUS FM (follow 'em on Twitter @BusRadioKajiado !), whose manager was there with us.

We were hanging around for some very good reasons. The first was a simple rule. As one of our radio partners so rightly says: "Never keep a farmer waiting". The second was that the local chief had called a meeting before ours, encouraging all parents to send their children to school. (Which is a loooong walk away for little legs in shorts – or, less obviously to some parents, in uniform dresses). The third was that these particular Massai sadly can't yet hear BUS FM, because the young station's present antenna doesn't reach far enough in this hilly landscape. So this had to be podcast stuff – no wait, no listeners.

The fourth good reason for waiting turned out to be that everybody loved it! (Although, as usual, one of the men needed some motherly prodding to get properly involved). After a prayer (see last week's blog) and a quietish start with tea, bread and Fanta, everyone jumped on the BUS. Extension Officer Raphael answered lots of questions about his radio interview on hygienic milking – and by the end we were all dancing and chanting.

Sometimes, waiting is more necessity than choice. (No idea how to say that in Latin). On the way from listening group to radio station, we got our second flat tyre. With the spare wheel already in action after puncture 1, we were rescued by the generosity of the village *bodaboda* rider. He'd already delivered the bread and Fanta on his motorbike, and then been our trilingual interpreter in the cow-shelter. And now off he went, for a 30 km round trip to the nearest garage offering tyre repairs, and charged us just 500 shillings for his help. That's a couple of beers, or eight newspapers.



In the interim, we had lots of time to talk, read, visit a cows' drinking pool, inspect the plague of invasive *Ipomoea* (s. photo, behind the Bovine Patrol), catch the sun (at last), and impress friends and relations with a better phone signal up a hill in rural Kajiado than (as I've noted before) in a Basel suburb. We waited cheerfully.

That seems also to be the case with Kenya's many citizens who recently waited for the new moon to start Ramadan. The newspapers have been showing lots of happy men buying dates or looking heavenwards. They also publish, to the minute, how long the Faithful in various parts of the country have to wait each day to break their fast.

Not all waiting is happy, however. I won't do the standard grumble about Nairobi traffic, because as a passenger, time in a jam is never wasted. But whether it's the company driver stuck in the evening miles from his children, or my Uber chauffeur taking 20 minutes for 500 of the meters en route to Nairobi's beautiful green racecourse, there are many sufferers.

My less amusing wait this week was at a conference – agriculturally flavoured, of course – in one of those designer hotels with (I heard at lunch) the shower in the middle of the bedroom. The organizers had done a great job getting a large audience and lots of speakers together. But they'd also taken the understandable but risky decision to kick off both days' proceedings with a Bigwig. And Bigwigs are usually late. In the worse case here, over an hour late. Protocol prevented the otherwise obvious step of reorganizing the schedule and starting with somebody who was actually there. So 300 people sat in an over-air-conditioned hall with too few wall-plugs and waited. Sure, there was chat, of the usual conference sort, and people did mails and their nails. But somehow the extra hour in bed would have been nice, not least for all the poor drivers.

In the end, Day 2 Bigwig never came, but sent a sub. Mr. Ersatz forgot to apologize, and read Bigwig's speech out verbatim, but was at least laudably short. The damage was done, however. Not least for the catering staff, who had rushed to get everything ready and were then an hour too early for the coffee break. The delicious fruit trays waited and wilted. Stomachs rumbled in the over-cooled hall. The last speakers of the day addressed a quarter-full room after the event had officially finished. A pity, because a lot of it was really good. That's probably why – to the delight of certain Latin teachers – we had all chosen to wait at the beginning.

But what's an hour in a week? To those of you I've kept waiting much longer for Bloglet Number 4, my apologies. (And for my appalling pun in the title). And to those thousands of Kenyan commuters who wait each day not only in traffic, but also in the rain for the dubious honour of joining the jams in already overpacked matatus, my eternal respect.



Nairobi & Kajiado, May 19th 2018

Fanchester Un(lim)ited

Castle's Kenya Collection (5) – Ugandan Edition

Farming and food star again in this bulletin. But the focus is on a crop I haven't mentioned yet, and a country I've now visited for the first time. I look forward to returning!

Cassava was definitely my thing this week. Boiled at dinner, roast in the car, on sale everywhere along the road. The long road from Kampala to northern Uganda.

Our partners at [NaCCRI](#), the Ugandan cassava (plus many other plants) research institute, are doing some fascinating work on this crop. With support from a very big foundation and us, they're working closely with colleagues at EMBRAPA. That's the giant national research organization in Brazil, one of the world's other great cassava nations.



Well-established cassava plants look like the picture at the bottom of the next page. The crop is known in some places as manioc, mandioca or yuca (not to be confused with yucca!), as well as by lots of other names. In the UK, it's also sweetly familiar to school lunch veterans – as tapioca. Far more importantly, cassava is a staple food for millions of Africans from west to east. It's also a key source of industrial starch. The market is booming.

So far, so yummy.

Unfortunately, cassava has some serious disadvantages in the field. The planting material – chunky lengths of stem – is bulky, inefficient to multiply, and vulnerable to pests and diseases. (Here's what



termites left of a stem 24 cm long and as thick as those above). Those weaknesses are bad news for farmers. East African smallholders can't grow enough of it to meet demand. Forex-sapping imports fill the gap.

So NaCCRI, EMBRAPA and we foundations are trying to change the equation. The Ugandans are now testing shorter pieces of planting material, pre-treated to stay healthy. (That's an approach adapted from sugarcane, which has some

agronomic similarities). Most of the studies are at NaCCRI HQ outside the capital, Kampala. Further sites are up that long road north.

Most of the road is dead straight, unkenyanly pothole-free, and light on traffic. (South Sudan and the D.R. Congo aren't really truckers' favorites right now). However, we got stopped by a very loud soldier for taking photos of a waterfall. This is illegal, apparently, although there's no sign to tell you. But Sergeant Yellatcha softened during debate and let us continue (free of charge) with a "May God forgive you". Perhaps our blue government number-plates helped. Or the wise words of the only lady on board.

Overall, and despite a very loud policeman as well, the road remained easy, including a friendly stop for Coke and – we're crop-loyal! – fried cassava. The Coke (or here unkenyanly often Pepsi) is important, by the way: Fried cassava is chewy, dull and dry.

Leave this great tarmac connection with the capital, however, and Uganda's rural arteries quickly turn red and bumpy. Despite 40 million inhabitants, the country tracks also pass surprisingly few villages. When they do, and if there's a TV, it always seems to be showing the same as in Kenya: soccer. Not Vipers vs. Entebbe Express, mind you, but (at least until these mercifully stop) European leagues. And now endless appetizers for the World Cup – even though Uganda and Kenya are like Italy (and the vast majority of the UN), and won't actually be participating.

With football on the flickering screen comes the merchandise, original or fake. Tons and tons of football shirts on road-side coathangers, and on people (mainly male) of all shapes and sizes. And yes:

In one of the remotest villages along a bumpy red track miles from the road to South Sudan, a little boy waves to our car in a Manchester United shirt.

More pervasive even than Coke, the likes of Man U, Barça and Bayern are on the chests of millions. They also grimace from idiosyncratic portraits on Kenyan matatus. (Most Ugandan buses are too smartly painted for Ronaldo & Co.). And while Switzerland is currently belly-aching about online gambling – to the point of a referendum (a.k.a. The National Hobby) – football indirectly pays for Kenya’s rich media landscape through betting ads, and for Uganda’s through breweries’ games of chance. Brazil would be proud of them!

So perhaps it’s a common love of football, as well as of science and cassava, that makes NaCCRI and EMBRAPA such excellent partners? (That’s not First-Time Visitor Me calling them that, it’s the highly-experienced Ugandan Director). But whatever the motivators, I wish



them the very best – including, vitally, the people working on the completely new business case. Because, just like footy shirts, innovative farming developments have to sell. It’s no good your new Man-ioc beating Man-chester on paper, if nobody wants it on the farm. Re-thought crops must appeal not just to scientists, but also to young men along bumpy red tracks near the DRC.

And to their mothers, wives and sisters, who do all the real work.

Back in Nairobi, May 26th 2018

“Hii advert haina story mingi”

Castle’s Kenya Collection (6)

Language plays a key role in agri-Culture. I promised to return to the topic. But farming is naturally just part of the story. June 1st is one of Kenya’s two birthdays. [Madaraka Day](#) seems an appropriate moment for some language musings.

Nobody’s quite sure how many languages Kenya speaks. But by general agreement, it’s a lot. 67 is one learned guesstimate.

Around national birthdays worldwide, there’s often talk of national glue – and language is typically either adhesive or divisive. (Ask Belgians about the latter, although they’re miles off 67). Kenya’s *Madaraka Day* is linguistically no match for the wonderful Bangladeshi *Ekushey*, which led to the UN’s Mother Language Day. (For sad reasons, Feb 21, in case you were wondering). But it’s a convenient excuse for me.

Kenya’s prime candidate for linguistic(k) UHU is Swahili – or Kiswahili, as it calls itself. The language scores way ahead of English, and is theoretically what everybody learns at school, whether their home tongue is Kikuyu, Kalenjin, Luo or number 67.



Kiswahili is fun to learn. (At least if you're not being marked on it at school). Contrary to popular complaint, there's no such thing as a "difficult" language: Toddlers acquire Japanese, Polish and Guaraní with equal ease. But Kiswahili makes first steps easy for non-toddlers. It's pretty phonetic (the opposite of English, for example), and has straightforward grammar. Not quite Mandarin-straightforward, mind you, because it's Welshly inflected. But a wonderful contrast to classroom torture instruments like French. It's also fun because Nairobians really appreciate it if you make the tiniest effort. (Hope certain ex-pats are reading this!)

There's also other cause for grins. Not because Kiswahili has the same word for 'river' and 'pillow' – that's vaguely Tolkienian. But having to rely on context to differentiate 'tomato' from 'grandmother' hints at happily horticultural humour. And to discover that a *nazi* here is something as brown, hairy and obstinate as a coconut seems strangely appropriate. Unlike clumsy English, Kiswahili also has useful expressions for one and two days beyond tomorrow or yesterday. The Germans must have felt at home when they were trying to run Tanzania.

But there's also a lot of moaning and groaning. Not least by journalists writing in English. One sounded off recently about MPs' reluctance to use the national glue in Parliament. He added: "A fluent Kiswahili speaker is often taken as inferior in the academic cadre". Another complained about Twitter's new offer of Kiswahili translations, saying the region had missed a chance to grow its own platforms. A language Prof even claimed that "there is no East African country that does not have problems with Kiswahili". To blame all round, it seems, is the runaway success of English – either on its own, or "diluting" the local tongue.

Given that Barclays advertises with the mixed-up title of this blog, some of the worries may be understandable. Conversations in our offices here also tend to mix and match a lot. (Multilingual business environments are often creative breeding-grounds: Basel is home to a special Teuto-Trumpic creole called Nowartisch).

Of course, moaning about language 'pollution' isn't limited to Kenya. People do it everywhere. The Académie Française has been paid to grumble since 1635. But it was interesting to see the *East African* (I promised in Blog 1 that I'd mention other newspapers!) take a different angle related to Uganda (learnéd idiom guesstimate: 43 upwards).

The *EA's* commentator went banging away sarcastically about "middle-class parents [who...] need to protect their children from learning their mother tongues" – or rather, as he points out, their grandmother tongues. "In Uganda, the only un-despised language is English", he jibed. The natural consequence? Invest in old people's homes, he winked, because that will help the middle-class stop grandparents "infecting" the kids with Luganda, Tooro, Acholi or Ganda. Alternatively, and less sarcastically: "Set up a foundation for preserving an endangered language".

He has a point. And it's sort of related to our radio work in Kenya. As I mentioned a couple of weeks ago, we're helping minority-language radio stations build up extension programmes – i.e. farm advice on air. Why did we choose smaller languages, and not the much wider reach of Kiswahili?

There are several reasons.

Firstly, we believe we're meeting a need. Speakers of languages other than Kiswahili and English are grossly underserved with agricultural advice. The county extension officers do a brave job, but they can't bump down everybody's path on a motorbike. Nor can they be expected to speak every farmer's language in their area. Radio help fills that gap. But local stations – typically with two or three staff for everything – need guidance to build farm programming.

Secondly, people listen better to their mother tongue, and implement more of what they hear. That's as true of the Massai ladies round the podcast on my photo as it is of anyone going through a Change Management process. (Which is what ag extension essentially means). International companies often forget this when running their Employee Campaign of the Month. But there's masses of evidence - the most important of which, for us, comes not from academics, but from farmer radio listeners themselves.

And then there's another point. Languages, like farm crop varieties, thrive if there's a market for them, and fade if there ain't. Ag extension provides a professional advantage, and thus a material one. If the young see that 'grandmother's language' is not just memories and fairytales, but also financially cool, they're much more likely to use it. That's not the central point of our work (we're an ag foundation, not an *East African* language-saver), and the theory from elsewhere is yet to be proved in this setting. But it's a topic close to my heart, and would be marvelous added value.

If you're interested in all this, there's lots more (theory and practice) [here](#).

Happy Madaraka Day!

Nairobi, for June 1st 2018



Open for more

Castle's Kenya Collection (7)

This week's edition jumps from office life to rural radio. And for a change mentions India and Peru. It also showcases students and takes a dig at misguided outsourcing and some other *Unsitten* of modern business.

A visitor asked me a difficult question this week. She was at a Nairobi workshop about part of our [Seeds2B](#) program. "What", she wanted to know, "are the differences between working here and in Switzerland?"

Sounds easy, doesn't it? But I thought an answer about commuter traffic would be boring (and the pushbike lobby in Basel town hall makes driving there a pain in the wotsits, too). I could also have described some differences in the employee lunch systems, but felt that probably wasn't why she'd asked. After that, I was a bit stuck.

So we got onto open-plan offices.

In Basel, I'm one of a happy minority on the Syngenta campus to work in an office smaller than my kitchen. In Nairobi (*photo*), I'm one of the great majority who would never want a kitchen this big. A few weeks in an office larger than my school dormitory hardly makes me a world expert on open-plan. But ignorance rarely throttles opinion. And my view of open-plan offices (OPOs) has always been less than friendly.

Looking at the thousands – millions? – of online publications on the topic, it's hard to understand why OPOs are so widespread. Sure, companies save on walls, and that probably makes vacuuming easier. But there's not much evidence for them being a good business idea. There's certainly very little reason to believe they improve communication. Either everybody avoids disturbing their neighbours, and an OPO is as communicative as a cemetery. Or they avoid being disturbed, and anybody who's not outside with the smokers is wearing autistic headphones.

Funny: Companies worldwide spend all that money on removing walls, with no proof it's a good idea. It's a bit like outsourcing IT to places where salaries are low, but powercuts frequent and accents hard to understand. Seems like a great saving up front, but when you ask for the longer-term numbers, there aren't any. And when you ask why "Customer Service" has moved to where its supposed providers can't actually meet any customers, the manager to blame has already left. (But if you want to see *real* customer focus, meet our Indian agri-entrepreneur [Gopal Pujari](#)).

End of rant.

In defence of all the academics who've so far failed to prove the wonders of OPOs: Comparing these with little walled rooms is a hard study to double-blind (and in this case, double-deaf). And I'm convinced that if we try hard enough, we can all think of some advantages. An OPO is a great place to learn another language – or at least some colorful expressions that don't pop up in formal Kiswahili lessons. There is also always somebody laughing. (Just rather loudly, if they're wearing headphones). Fewer walls mean fewer doors, and therefore fewer keys to lose. I'm sure you can add to this list of plus-points: Drop the [Syngenta Foundation](#) a mail!

Another likely reason why academics haven't yet cracked this nut is that there are lots of much more interesting things to study. At any one time, for example, there are usually several people around the world working on academic topics with or about our Foundation.

An example of the "With" is our program on [Demand-led Breeding](#). Nairobi is well-represented here. Several more studies are running in the [Policy](#) field. Our current "About" list includes two Master's theses. A young Swiss lady is seeing what happened to our work in [Peru](#) after we handed it over. And, as of this week, a German student is examining my favourite Kenyan initiative: radio extension in minority languages. His special focus is on the listening groups I've mentioned a couple of times.





He, our wonderful partners at [Kilimo Media](#) and I headed first to Kajiado (*photo*), about an hour south of Nairobi. The area, as I said in blog issue 4, is home to BUS FM. This radio station now broadcasts farm info in Kimassai. And importantly for our student visitor, BUS and the local extension officer are both very keen on listener groups.

Today's session was rather more "open plan" than the last – a couch on the grass rather than planks in a cow shed. The debate, too, was very open. The Massai ladies quickly warmed up after the podcast

on milk production, and started talking. (Perhaps it was good that all the men were at the cattle market – their wives were able to discuss their own topics in peace). They also very willingly opened up to our German student. In fact, they were rather sad when he ran out of questions, and wanted him to keep on interviewing. The BUS FM manager was equally informative. So a good start to data collection for the Master's thesis. There's more to come soon in Kitui (also near Nairobi) and Marsabit (miiiiles away).

And yes, key to the ladies' openness was the fact that they could give all their interview answers in their mother tongue. And I'm happy to say they all confirmed that farm advice in their own language is much better than in Kiswahili. What's more, the extension officer is open for the ladies' suggestions for future program topics. First choice for pastoralists struggling with climate change? How to produce and store fodder.

Time for me to shut up now. But thank you for opening my blog.

Nairobi, June 8th 2018

Signs of life

Castle's Kenya Collection (8)

We get another holiday this week: Friday is Eid al-Fitr, the end of Ramadan. This bloglet is largely unrelated – but not entirely.

What's the most frequent non-commercial sign in Nairobi? (So Safaricom, Coke and "If you like it... Crown it" don't count). The answer is probably "No Hooting". This doesn't mean Kenyans dislike owls: They're anyway a lot less audible here than horribly head-aching Hadidas. "No Hooting" is an appeal to motorists. Using one's Toyotan honker is a standard way of attracting gate guards' attention. But it can be a bit annoying after midnight. Or, until the end of this week, during a Ramadan siesta.

Another popular sign is "No Hawking". Again, this has nothing to do with ornithology, nor with Arabian hunting methods. People who live behind gates don't like other people trying to sell them things there. Which I suppose is ok, because there's ample opportunity to buy more or less anything in traffic jams. Bananas, crisps and water I understand. Newspapers make sense, too. But I'm always a bit surprised to be offered giant maps of Africa, bike tyres and Monopoly sets (often by the same person). However, as my accountant father used to say: "Somebody must be buying it, or they wouldn't be selling it". I haven't checked yet if traffic-jam Monopoly uses Nairobi streets instead of Park Lane and the Königsallee. But if anybody wants to order a set, I'll do my best.

Traffic-jams – sorry if this is getting a bit clichéd, but they're daily life here – arguably ignore another frequent sign: "No idling". Or the version included in my blog number 3: "No idle sitting". I suppose *non*-idle sitting means cycling, show-jumping and rowing. (Great Britain wins most Olympic medals in

events where one doesn't have to support one's own weight). "No idling" sounds like a Victorian schoolmaster exhorting teenagers. But in Nairobi it's meant to improve security: Gun-carrying guards will move you on very loudly if they catch you idly trying to catch an Uber in front of a public building.

Other signs here could reopen international debate on English orthography. (As if American spelling didn't confuse us all enough already!) This is official tax-payers' signage, by the way, not graffiti: Near the Syngenta office there are some "Police Headquarters". And the road I live in is also fun. Admittedly, it's quite long. But I'm still intrigued to find its name spelled four different ways between the two ends. Along the way, creative neologisms such as "Resedence", "Promenade" and (on a street sign) "Terrase" freely frolic with Frenchier bits of urban vocabulary. So does "Survialance", although that makes CCTV sound rather unpleasant.

Rural signs tend to focus on less luxurious subjects. "Slow down Flooding ahead" reminds us that 2018 has been disastrously wet in many areas. And you know you've left Nairobi for the countryside when the signs on empty land change from "This plot NOT for sale" to "Plots for sale".

As well as being a skilled chicken portraitist, this photo's Agrovet – a sort of Landi or Raiffeisen – is also less violent than animal lovers may fear. She is simply selling the yummy food that a mature *Sus scrofa domesticus* (or its local equivalent) needs to finish becoming – in some people's eyes – yummy food itself. The other door advertises feed for earlier in the porcine growth cycle. Ms. Agrovet also sells something any former East German would immediately recognize: broiler pellets.



Rural Kenya is rich in signs to schools. Many include – as do the school walls – the institute's Vision and/or Mission and/or Motto. Most are too long to read when driving past. But there are also nice short ones. Some are straight-up scholambitious: "To work hard and be the best". Others are strongly product-oriented: "Love of learning and upstanding citizens". A few are evolutionary: "Give us a boy, and we'll give you a man". (This one confused me, because everyone nearby was female).

One sign I've only seen outside Nairobi is "Don't chew Khat". Better known here as *miraa*, leaves of the khat bush are a popular – if dodgy – smallholder cash-earner. For example for a lady who's just been voted Farmer of the Week by her local extension officer on one of 'our' radio stations. The crop looked very healthy. I hasten to add, however, that her accolade is for excellent work with tomatoes. And no, the extension officer does not advise on crops whose use is heavily restricted by law!

Stern admonitions of the "keep off miraa" type are not restricted to the countryside, however. I'm not sure Kenya Broadcasting in Nairobi bans "personal photos" from its studios, like one of our radio partners, or relationships between its (five) staff members. But the definitely urban gym I use includes "No swearing" in its list of instructions. "Profanity", as the sign helpfully explains, "can be offensive". I'm not sure if the EU military guys on cool-down from duty in Mogadishu actually read the instructions, but they're very quiet on the benchpresses. And I trust that truck-drivers leaving Nairobi via the weighbridge are equally well-behaved when they see: "You are entering a corruption-free zone".

Do I have a special wish for Eid al-Fitr? Well, one would be for signs of happier times at NBO Airport:



Kajiado, Marsabit (!) and Nairobi, ahead of June 15th 2018

Goodbye to Mall that

Castle's Kenya Collection (9)

Two months gone already! Time to say "asante sana" to Kenya, and soon "kwaheri". And to collect my thoughts.

What's a favourite game when leaving somewhere after a longish stay? Several people have recently asked me: "What will you miss about Kenya?"

Years ago, I played this game about the UK. Moving to 1980's Germany, the answer was "not much". The only advantages of Maggie Thatcher's Britain seemed to be decent Sunday newspapers, customer-friendly shopping hours and widespread ATMs. (Apart from Bavaria, they've now largely caught up).

So what will I miss about Kenya? Or as one colleague here puts it: "What can Switzerland learn from us?" (Apart from mobile transactions, storytelling and how to fill churches).

The following lists are neither complete, nor in any order of priority.





I'll miss Kenyan avocados, for example. Giant avocados that bizarrely cost less than tomatoes. And a wonderful array of tropical fruit, including tamarinds and (to my bananaphobe surprise) plantains. Sugarcane juice, pressed on request at the greengrocers. Street food that deserves the name. (Don't tell Occupational Health!) Goat and ugali *al fresco* on Waiyaki Way. Roadside roast maize, miles from Nairobi. Mandazis from a big plastic box. Sukuma wiki, pilipili, chapatis and

cowpea githeri. And off the street, office lunches! More mandazis. Plus Syngenta mixed tea (but to colleagues' astonishment, with no extra sugar).

If this all sounds suspiciously ag-value-chainy and nutrition-obsessed, don't worry: I shan't be missing the coffee. Strangely, for a country that grows the stuff (and whose capital thus has a suburb called Kahawa), most of the liquid version is dishwasher. (The Foundation used to have a [Zivildienstleistender](#) who's a coffee guru, so I'm almost entitled to judge).

What else is high on my "Wish you were here" list? Again, the connection is agricultural: a happy *souplisse* with languages. I recently visited another [radio](#) listening group, this time in Kitui. That's about three hours east of Nairobi; the local vernacular is Kikamba. The lady farmers doing the listening moved effortlessly and fuss-free back and forth between this mother tongue, Swahili and English. Which left me wondering where in Europe I'd find contentedly trilingual poultry-raisers. Language there, as in many places, has often got too aggressively political, too defensively emotional, or simply depressingly monoglot. Kenya has its "ethnic" troubles, oh yes. But I'll look back fondly to the fine example of Mama Kitui.

I'll also get nostalgic about The Unexpected. The Sundays-only parade of monkeys down our road. Waiters singing "Happy Birthday" at multiple tables in a restaurant. The cleaner with a business diploma who follows [@syngentafdn](#). A sudden chant-and-clap by a radio listener group. The Nairobi lawyer who works in Kabul. Actually winning some money at the races. The bar waitress who said "A what?" when I asked for a Coke. The charm of Entebbe (ok, doesn't really count in a Kenyan list). Not missing chocolate, but being sent shortbread (obrigado!) The father I'd assumed was begging, but who needed advice on his son's eye infection. The new road to Marsabit. Camels in city traffic. Staff meetings that begin with a prayer and end with Black Forest gâteau. A rather handsome gecko in the bathroom. And so on and so forth. Perhaps Europe is getting too predictable?

There'll be plenty of humour to miss as well. Not that Basel is laughless – far from it. But here there always seems to be somebody enjoying a joke. Uber drivers tell them (typically about the police and boda boda riders). Open-plan offices (I know, on my Yuck List) share them generously. The *Daily Nation* (I'm getting repetitive) makes me laugh both intentionally and not. But top marks also go to a Nairobi fruit-seller. He thought I was going to buy a mango, and laughed when I asked for a photo instead.

I'll stop before Kenya gets too big-headed. And turn to what I won't be missing. Or as one blog reader asked last week: "What are you looking forward to in Switzerland?"

Not shopping in Malls. Being scanned going out rather than in. Brilliant public transport. Pavements that deserve the name. People I last saw in April. Longer daylight, at least for a while. Not opening the daily paper to pages of suspected corruption and misappropriation. Coffee that's a pleasure to drink. (Zivi-Guru roasts his near Basel). Not having people noisily rewash already clean cars beneath my

window at 6 a.m. every Sunday. Rowing and squash (I could have done both here, however).
Neighbours with children. Birds who are quieter than Hadidas.

But that, frankly, is about it. Asante sana Kenya!



Paul Castle, Nairobi, two months after arrival