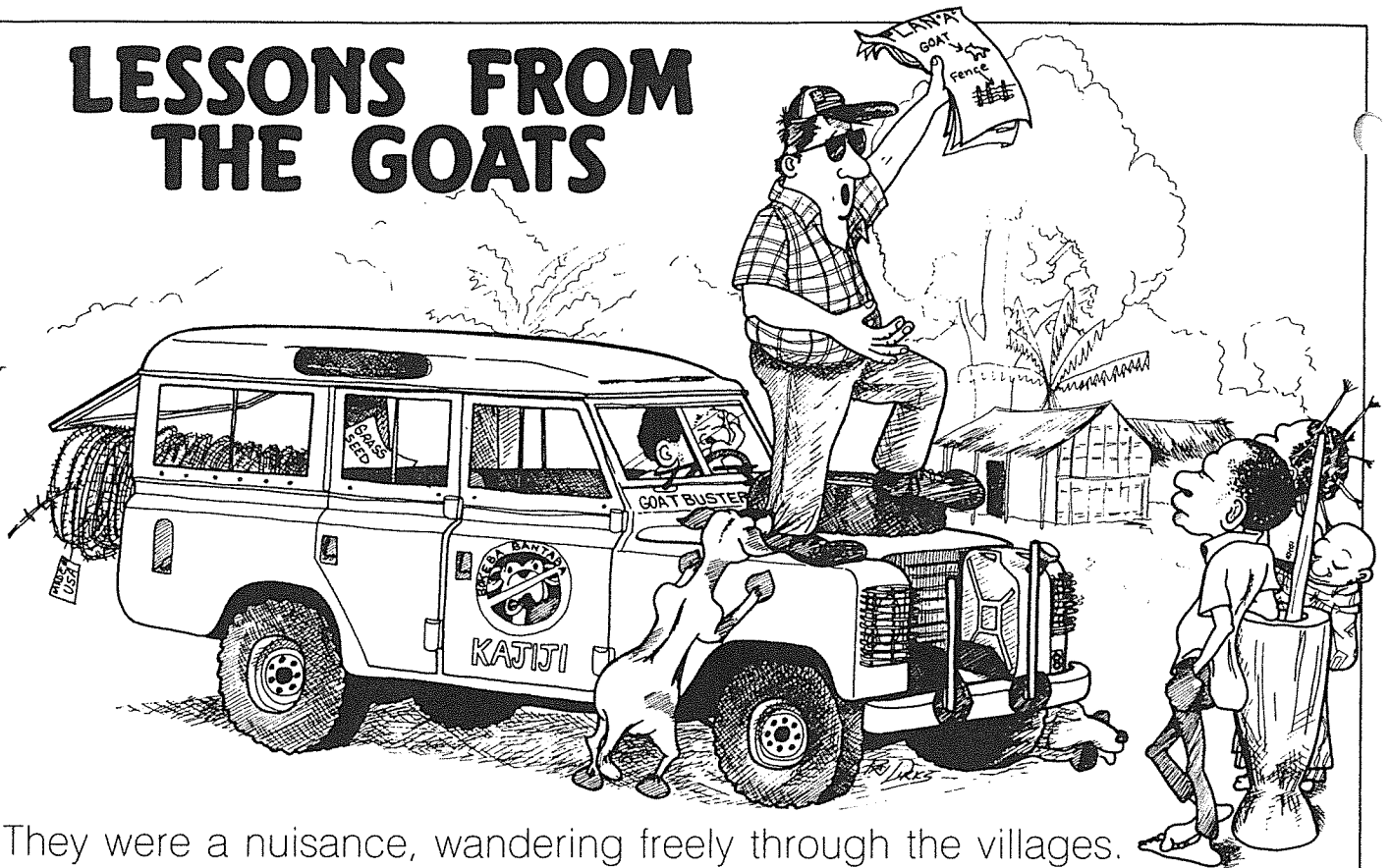


LESSONS FROM THE GOATS



They were a nuisance, wandering freely through the villages. It made sense to fence them in. Or so he thought.

by Merrill Ewert

THE INK was barely dry on my Tabor College diploma when I first arrived in Southern Zaire to manage a feeding program for tuberculosis patients at a Mennonite Brethren mission hospital. With a grant from a European funding agency, I was also encouraged to help local villagers address the agricultural problems of the region.

One of the first things I noticed was the goats that roamed freely through the villages. Thin, smelly and covered with flies, they nonetheless wandered in and out of houses, defecated in the compounds, ate cassava (people's staple food) from the drying racks, rummaged through the garbage and nibbled at the laundry drying in the sun. The goats destroyed gardens in the community protected by small, stick fences that were easily breached. I saw families become angry with each other when the animals of one ate the vegetables of the other. At best, these goats were a health

hazard and a general nuisance.

A better way

Raised on a Minnesota farm, I had won awards for my pedigreed sheep. I understood the basic principles of animal husbandry. This experience combined with new insights gleaned from my anthropology courses at Tabor led me to conclude that there must be a better way to raise goats in Zaire.

After discussions with several local farmers, I ordered 50 rolls of wire from the United States which would be used to fence in farmers' goats. By fencing in the goats, I reasoned, the people would be rid of several problems. They would also improve the nutrition of their animals who would graze on better grass in pastures outside the village. Farmers could monitor their animals inside the fence and augment their diets with millet, corn and grass. I saw a potential breakthrough in goat production in the community through the introduction of this new technology.

The missing order

Meanwhile, political problems flared up in Zaire. Mail was lost and messages went undelivered. For reasons unknown, my order for 50 rolls of wire never arrived at its destination. The wire was never shipped and the goats continued to wreak havoc in the community.

I discovered, however, that most farmers could not have afforded to purchase rolls of wire from me. Through observation and experience, I also learned more about goats.

Goats in Africa

1. *God feeds the goats.* Farmers may be responsible for feeding their families but God feeds the goats. A goat raised inside a fence, I learned, will surely go hungry. They are expected to scavenge. To help villagers achieve a better life, I had proposed a solution through which the goats would probably have starved to death.

2. *Goats eat garbage.* Though goats snatch cassava from the dry-

ing racks, they also eat garbage, drink rain water from tin cans lying in the village and drain puddles which attract mosquitoes. I had said, in effect, "I have a great idea to help improve your lives — banish your garbage disposal systems from the village!"

3. *Grass draws mosquitoes.* The *Anapholis* mosquito which carries malaria is responsible for more deaths than any other living creature in the world. Goats destroy grass by tearing it off at the roots. Left to themselves, they will strip a village of grass thereby making it a less desirable habitat for mosquitoes. These indigenous lawn mowers that I tried to remove from the community help reduce malaria by controlling the grass.

4. *Snakes dislike bare ground.* A grassy compound is an invitation to snakes to join you at home. With a little help from their goats, villagers keep the ground bare around their houses, effectively discouraging these visits. If a snake slithers into the compound in spite of this precaution, you can usually find it by following its tracks in the dust. My proposal for improving goat production in the community implied removing its snake control system.

5. *It's cold at 3,000 feet.* Grass walls are poor insulation against cold weather. However, goats inside your house will keep you warm. By trying to confine the animals to fences outside the village, I was guaranteeing that people would be cold at night when dry season winds chilled the community.

6. *Goats hear thieves.* Some goats sleep inside the houses while other farmers build lean-to shelters under the eaves. People told of being awakened at night by the bleating of goats when thieves sneaked into their compounds. My suggestion for solving the community's goat problem was to keep nature's burglar alarms outside the village. There, they would be of no assistance, and would probably even be stolen themselves.

7. *Lions eat goats.* One family

tied its goat to a tree inside the compound and woke in the morning to find only the leash remaining. Tracks in the dust revealed that a lion had stopped by for a midnight snack. Goats that sleep in your house, however, are reasonably safe. My plan for a goat pasture outside the village would have been tantamount to opening a cafeteria for the lions and leopards of Southern Zaire.

8. *A sick goat is a dead goat.* When you sleep with your goat, you usually notice when it's ill. If animals sleep outside the village, they may become sick and die before you notice. An apparently sensible solution for raising goats had the potential for economic disaster should health problems enter a particular herd.

9. *Every goat in Africa has worms.* Goats raised in restricted areas have higher rates of infestation by internal parasites and are more susceptible to its consequences. Though I did not understand the physiological principles involved, I observed that health problems quickly spread throughout a herd when goats are raised in restricted quarters. However well-motivated, my proposal for improved animal husbandry practices had yet another fatal flaw.


Lessons from the goats

The goats of Southern Zaire taught me some important lessons. First, farmers know more about their problems than we development workers usually realize. At the same time, we understand much less than we think we do. Generally, things are not what they seem to be. Urgent human needs often compel development workers to take immediate action. We draw on our training as we interpret the problems of development and reflect our own experience as we suggest possible solutions. Not surprisingly, this can lead to big mistakes.

Second, the process of development takes much longer than we imagine. Introducing new solutions before we understand the problems

they are designed to solve is a serious but common mistake. It took me years to learn what Zairian farmers have always known. Short-term workers should be more modest in making development decisions.

Third, real understanding comes through relationships. I tested my goat fence proposal on various farmers who all agreed that it was a brilliant answer to a pressing local problem. Thus convinced of its viability, I moved ahead, believing "this is what the people want." Much later, I learned that my friends had carefully told me exactly what they thought I wanted to hear. They did not want me to "lose face" or feel badly by disagreeing with my proposal. Some also felt that I might have some inside information that superseded what everyone had known for generations, that you cannot raise goats inside fences under those conditions. Only after I had established deeper, personal relationships with several individuals did I begin to understand some of the deeper problems of the community. Only then were people willing to point out the flaws and weaknesses in my suggestions.

Development is a process of growth through which people progressively become more aware of their own problems and committed to finding appropriate solutions. We can facilitate that process, provide technical information and encourage them in this quest for a better life. We must, however, be modest in proposing solutions to problems we may not understand. That understanding comes not as a result of our technical competence but through the personal relationships of trust with those whom we want to serve. 

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