Drought is what you do to your land

By Berhe W. Aregay

According to the view of Dr.Tilahun Amede of the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture, which he expounded in an interview with a weekly *Amharic* newspaper, we don't have to ponder the skies to mark on drought, because the culprit might be found right under our feet. And it is called *soil erosion.*

He didn't, of course, mean to say soil erosion directly affects the weather. As he explained it, as soils get eroded, become poorer, shallower and eventually are debilitated, be sure that drought in situ has set in.

The amount of moisture that

The figure given above gives a good enough indication of the intertwined relationship between deep, well maintained soils and their ability to hold enough water and give robust plants and vise versa.

Our incrementally truncated soils, absent soil conservation measures, make them hardly ideal grounds to resist rainfall fluctuations and give back ample crops.

What impoverished soils are good at is let most of the rainwater flow past them, escaping as runoff. They rarely are the powerhouse of photosynthesis.

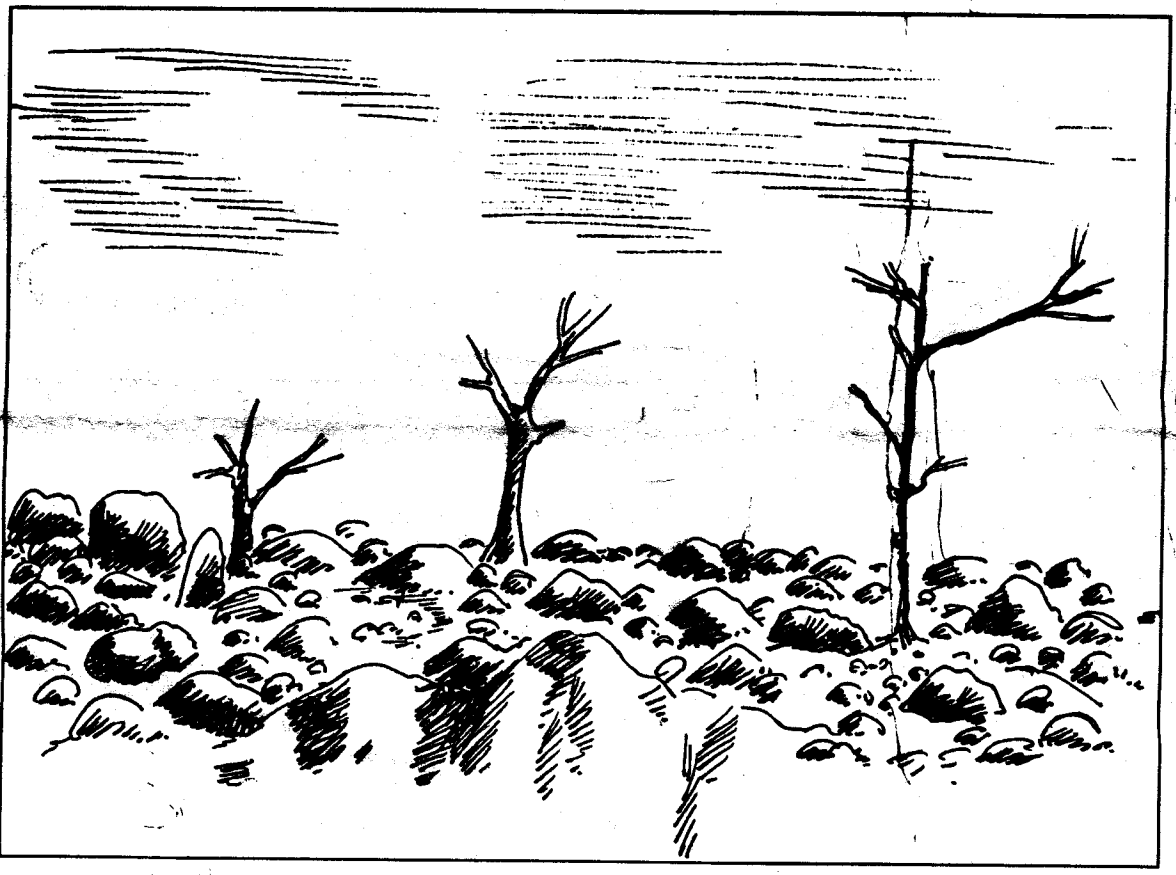
Ok. We might have to ask one absolutely relevant question:

Dr. Tilahune, in the interview, was asked several questions on sundry issues regarding genetically modified crops (GM crops), water harvesting in Ethiopia etc. His answers on these issues held the middle ground, all right.

As a researcher he tried to see both side of the issues. On engineered crops for instance, he cautioned that outright rejection of the technology and everything that has to do with it would be unwise.

On the issue of soil erosion and its being the cancer of our agriculture, however, he was unequivocal. With soil erosion there are no pros and cons.

In other words, soil erosion in



crops require to reach full maturity on such soils becomes increasingly on the rise. So to be able to harvest equivalent yields with that say of 3 years ago, under the same conditions, you will need to have more moisture now.

Your impoverished farmland will now need more coaxing, as it were. What irony that though, with each year passing it seems the skies are more and more stingy.

As an agricultural researcher with wide knowledge about farming in other African countries, he pointes out the fact that in some west African countries, with only 400-500 mm of rain but with their soils remaining in tact, you don't hear much talk about droughts.

Here in Ethiopia, with most places having wetter climates than that, drought is always around the corner and is constantly in the national consciousness.

Why is it then that we have good harvests every once in a while, when it rains optimally?

True, when the rains are optimal, i.e. when they are neither too much nor too little, when the onsets are right on schedule, and when they end right on time, you get good crops.

But good crops compared to when? If compared with drought years, *yes*. But compared to what well-conserved, well maintained soils should give, moisture remaining the same, the answer is *no*.

In my opinion, a stable, sustainable farming system is one that doesn't collapse whenever the climate goes off-center. You can never be sure with the weather. In any case expect in most years less than optimal precipitations.

Weather anywhere is more often than not, fickle. But any farming worth its salt should withstand minor natural fluctuations and be able to deliver.

particular, and land degradation in general ought to be a primordial preoccupation for Ethiopians as a whole. As someone said, it takes away both our past and our future.

Dr. Tilahune might have been, to my knowledge at least, the first person to say the source of droughts in Ethiopia is due to soil erosion.

The direct links between soil erosion and lack of sustainable and robust farming, however, was there all along for everyone to see.

Research on the subject crowd shelves on many government offices.

But maybe anecdotal evidence will be more convincing. For that look no further than the resettlement program.

The thousands of families that are being resettled leave behind them lands that have been destroyed by erosion and by them.