



The Right Livelihood Award

for outstanding vision and work on behalf of our planet and its people

Aklilu Lemma (Ethiopia)†

Joint Award with Legesse Wolde-Yohannes (1989)



"...for discovering and campaigning relentlessly for an affordable preventative against bilharzia."

Aklilu Lemma

Bilharzia, or schistosomiasis, is a debilitating and eventually fatal illness, which afflicts more than 200 million people in 74 countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America. Present therapies for bilharzia, and molluscicides to kill the snail-carriers of the disease, are far too expensive for the communities that need them.

In 1964 a young Ethiopian doctor, Aklilu Lemma, discovered that suds from the fruit of a common African plant, the endod or soapberry, which African women have used as soap for centuries, act as a potent molluscicide. To follow up this discovery, Lemma in 1966 established the Institute of Pathobiology in Addis Ababa University, and for the next 10 years he directed a team to carry out systematic research on endod. He was joined in this work in 1974 by Legesse Wolde-Yohannes.

The discovery seemed to offer no less than cheap, locally-controllable means of eradicating a disease that is the second greatest scourge (after malaria) in the Third World. And Lemma's early research confirmed this potential. Yet progress in making this endod product available to the people who need it has been extremely slow, for reasons that expose some of the biases and failings of the international medical community.

However, Lemma's and Wolde-Yohannes' persistence and the support of key scientists and donors in the West have opened the door to the necessary laboratory and field trials. An endod research and application network has also been established, linking five African countries, and the plant is being grown and used for experimental control of schistosomiasis.

Before his death in 1997, Lemma and colleagues established the Endod Foundation to serve as an umbrella for all endod-related work. Following collaboration with Lemma, the University of Toledo, USA, was granted a US patent on an endod-based molluscicide intended to control the zebra mussels which have recently invaded American lakes and caused extensive damage to water supplies. This has opened a major new hope for marketing and exporting endod as a cash crop.

Aklilu Lemma took a doctorate in pathobiology from Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA. In Ethiopia he held many senior academic and advisory positions. From 1976 he worked in the UN system and became Deputy Director of UNICEF's International Child Development Centre in Florence, Italy, before taking up a Visiting Professorship in the Department of International Health, Johns Hopkins University.

Quotation

"We have learned the hard way that the root problems of scientific research in Africa are not only the lack of facilities and funds but also the biases of individuals and organisations in industrialised countries... I believe that the best future course for Africa is to invest in efforts to build on the endogenous capabilities of its own people."

Aklilu Lemma

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