

## **'When Help is Not Helpful' Case Study - Tomatoes in Zambia**

*The following case study is from F. David Peat's book "Gentle Action".*

Ernesto Sirolli was a young man who volunteered with the Italian Agency of Technical Cooperation, an aid agency working in Africa. Sirolli was one of the first volunteers sent to a tiny village in Zambia with the intention of starting a farming project for the local inhabitants. The long-term goal was to create a cooperative with shared tractors, seed and storage sheds. The first step towards this goal was to hire thirty local men to clear land in preparation for the farm. At the end of the first day things looked promising, and the men were paid the equivalent of one dollar; a sum agreed upon by the Zambian government and the Agency. On the second day no one turned up for work. It did not take long for the Italians to discover that one day's wage was sufficient to keep a family for a week, and so the question arose—how to persuade the men to turn up each morning, when they really did not need the extra money. The answer lay in some of the things the volunteers had brought with them—sunglasses, beer, whisky, watches and transmitter radios. They would persuade the workers to keep coming back each day until they had saved enough money to buy these objects.

And so the fields were cleared and crops of tomatoes planted with seeds brought from Italy. The whole project looked as if it was going to be an amazing success, for the Zambian soil and climate was producing gigantic plants. Finally, when the crops were almost ripened, Sirolli went out to view the field. To his horror the tomatoes were nowhere to be seen. The culprits lay in the river—at night hippopotamuses had climbed onto the land and eaten all the tomatoes. No one had thought of the hippos. The project was an utter failure. All that had been achieved was to make the local people dependent on money and alcohol.