A new Italian development project is seeking to put honey back into the life of rural Angola. There is even the possibility that, in the future, the bees will be used to detect some of the landmines buried in Angola during the civil war.

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The initiative - organized by Italy’s LumbeLumbe non-profit association - will see Italian beekeepers work to revive honey production in the African country, which is emerging from the ruins of over 30 years of civil war.

The hope is to provide livelihoods and fresh hope for people in one of the world’s poorest states - the Sub-Saharan country came 12th-from-bottom in the UN Development Programme's 2004 wealth ranking.

Apiculture, which was introduced by the Portuguese when they colonized the country, was a thriving activity in Angola before the civil war.

But the disruption of the conflict means local know-how on the art of honey-making has been lost.

LumbeLumbe President Italo Governatori said the initiative is of "strategic importance to the local communities", which will be taught to produce candles from beeswax, as well as honey. "This is very important in parts of the country without electrical energy and lighting, and apiculture will also enrich diets that often lack nutrition," he explained.

Governatori said many older Angolans recall the old beehives in the villages and have welcomed the project with enthusiasm. LumbeLumbe is being supported in this enterprise by the Italian Federation of Beekeepers (FAI), Farmers’ Confederation Confagricoltura and Salesian Catholic missionary groups. The University of Sassari, which is also using the project as an opportunity to research African botany, is taking part as well.

Around 80 families in the villages of Cangumbe and Dando will be trained in beekeeping as part of the three-year project. Angolan carpenters, who will be taught how to make the equipment needed for apiculture, will benefit too.

FAI President Raffaele Cirone stressed that the initiative will be carried out with total respect for local biodiversity. "European bees will not be taken to Angola," Cirone explained. "We will use local species that are much better suited to the flora of the area and can fly as far as 10km away from the hive to collect nectar.

"These bees are widespread throughout the continent and can become a precious resource enabling the poorest peoples to become self-sufficient."

The organizations involved acknowledge that the project is not going revolutionize rural Angola. But they argue modest development programmes of this type - which involve low-tech equipment that can easily be used and fixed by locals - are much more likely to change people lives than the overly ambitious projects tried in the past.

"It's a project that starts life with its feet on the ground," said Confagricoltura President Vito Bianco. "It's simple, easily carried out and can be exported at a low cost. It does not have the presumptuousness of the grand humanitarian projects for the Third World, but it will bring immediate benefits for local people."

There is even the possibility that, in the future, the bees will be used to detect some of the landmines buried in Angola during the civil war - some experts have estimated there are as many as a million landmines lurking under the country's soil. Hundreds of Angolans have been killed by the mines and thousands have been crippled.

American scientists have conducted a number of promising experiments in which bees have been trained to detect TNT, a substance present in many mines. "Maybe we will propose the use of bees to map out mine fields, as has been experimented successfully in the Unites States, to the Angolan government," said Cirone. "Guaranteeing the safety of the beekeepers as they walk along the paths to get to the hives is one of the most problematic parts of the project."

With its long, proud tradition of honey-making, Italy has strong credentials as a apiculture mentor. One of the nation’s finest honeys, from the Lunigiana region of northern Tuscany has even been awarded the European Union’s prestigious PDO - Protected Designation of Origin - label. It was the first Italian honey to win this recognition.

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