

Uganda – Improving the food security, income and livelihoods of rural farmers

Uganda's economy widely depends on the agricultural sector. Over 85% of the estimated 32 million inhabitants of the country live in rural areas and rely mainly on agriculture for their livelihood. At the same time, it can be said that most agricultural activities take place in these rural areas. It is therefore right to say that Uganda's food production is widely dependent on rural women and men farmers.

Agriculture, a key sector

Many regions in Uganda are practicing subsistence agriculture. Families practice agriculture on the small plots of land they own. Their target is to produce enough food to feed their families until the next harvest. In many cases, however, even this subsistence agriculture falls short of its target. Often, the yields are not enough to feed the family until the next harvest, leading to food shortages in the homes. This has largely been attributed to poor farming methods (many farmers have chosen to remain conservative, resulting in little or no diversity in their farming methods), prolonged droughts, pests and diseases.

Since agriculture is the main or only source of income, food and general livelihood for these rural farmers, they are often faced with situations where they have to sell part of their agricultural produce to pay for (basic) needs, such as access to health facilities, school fees and rent. However, selling part of the produce further worsens food shortages in rural homes because the majority of the farmers are subsistence farmers. Furthermore, farmers often sell their produce at very low prices because the market is not easily accessible and the middlemen exploit them as they are desperate to sell.

A spark of hope

However, the example of the Sanyu Ly'amaka ("Family Pride") Farmers Group shows that rural farmers can actually improve their food security and livelihoods. The group was formed in 2007 by four women farmers in Masaka district to empower rural farmers in Bukoto Central Region. Its aim: to ensure sustainable rural livelihoods for rural farmers by sensitizing

them on improved farming methods, encouraging group formation and knowledge sharing while ensuring environmental integrity.

Today, the Sanyu Ly'amaka Farmers Group is composed of 18 farmers – 11 women and 7 men. The group works closely with over 100 other rural farmers in the region. While most of them are small scale farmers, others are trying to go commercial as a means to alleviate rural poverty. They grow food crops like beans, soy beans, ground nuts, maize, cassava, matooke (banana), sweet potatoes and vegetables. On the side, they grow coffee, keep poultry, raise small numbers of livestock or tend small eucalyptus forests.

Each of the group's members has a family with an average of 6 dependants – at least two adults (wife or husband plus one member of the extended family) and a number of children, most of them in the school going age. Sanyu Ly'amaka's target is to reach out, through its 18 members, to over 300 rural farmers in the region.

The group received 1,000 USD seed funding from the World Bank and, recently, 695 USD through the Evoke Global Giving fundraising challenge. The group acknowledges that this has been a big boost for them, but they note that there are still a lot of challenges ahead of them.

Empowerment through a demonstration farm

With the limited resources available to them, the Sanyu Ly'amaka Farmers Group has a plan to build a demonstration farm. This initiative

will facilitate knowledge and skills sharing among the rural farmers in the area. The demonstration farm will act as a learning centre to extend best practices like organic crop production methods (sustainable organic agriculture) and permaculture to the rural farmers. Permaculture is an ecological design system for sustainability in all aspects of human endeavor. It teaches farmers how to build natural homes, grow their own food, restore diminished landscapes and ecosystems, catch rainwater, build communities and much more.¹

On the demonstration farm, the rural farmers will learn how to improve their farming methods and yields regardless of the size of their farms, financial status or even level of education. The demonstration farm is also expected to help reinvent the spirit of cooperative farming, helping individual farmers enjoy advantages like collective economies of scale. As a group, rural farmers stand a better chance of producing larger volumes and better quality farm produce, which in turn will give them better bargaining power. Group support to all the beneficiaries involved will also ensure that they all get equal opportunities to benefit from the available resources. This way, cooperative farming will solve problems like low productivity, gender inequality and limited land for agriculture. To ensure effective group dynamics, there will be need for training on group formation and management.

Sanyu Ly'amaka also encourages the youth to actively participate in the project. The future demonstration farm will cater for their information needs and will provide training opportunities. 65% of Uganda's total population is





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made up of youth. This means that they have a very important role to play in supporting and contributing to the country's food security. They are therefore encouraged to participate in agriculture, to reduce unemployment while achieving social and economic empowerment.

Furthermore, the enlightenment affects both women and men. Even though most of the food growers are women, it's their husbands who own the land. This means that the men will often dictate what to do and what not to do on the family land. This project sensitizes the men on the role of agriculture in rural development, so that they will allow their wives to have

equal access to the family plots for agricultural purposes. In so doing, both women and men contribute to the desired changes, that is, improved farm yields and improved rural livelihoods, hence ensuring food security in rural communities and beyond.

The Sanyu Ly'amaka Farmers Group has improved the livelihoods of its members by sensitizing them on improved farming methods, encouraging group formation and knowledge sharing while ensuring environmental integrity.

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Testimony

Margaret Kisaakye is a retired civil servant. After her retirement she realized that her farm was one of the easiest and best ways of ensuring food security in her home. "I started farming on a small plot and later I bought more land to expand my farm. My farm is of great value to me because it is not only a source of food but also a source of income", says Margaret, who is one of the founding members of Sanyu Ly'amaka Farmers Group. "We started as a small group and we are growing big. Many of the rural farmers around the country have not realized that agriculture is a key tool in rural poverty eradication. The

major challenge that we have faced as Sanyu Ly'amaka Farmers Group is lack of empowerment. Our group members have been able to pull together a small fund which has enabled us to visit rural farmers to share skills. Ssozi, staff member at WOUNNET (Women of Uganda Network), has fundraised for us through the Internet and we have been able to secure some donations that will help us in implementing our activities. We have plans to build a demonstration farm in a rural farm setting. This demonstration farm will be very important, because it will be a learning centre for our rural farmers."



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