

EGG PRODUCTION REVIVING RURAL ECONOMY

Zimbabwe's economy is beginning to rebound after more than ten years of decline. With that, availability of and access to food is improving. Given that more than two-thirds of Zimbabweans make a living from agriculture, a healthy agriculture sector is essential to the country's recovery. Finding innovative ways to unlock production potential, especially among the country's more than 1.5 million smallholder farmers, is important. Most smallholder farmers, for example, keep poultry, but few engage in commercial egg production because of limited know-how and links to markets. Zimbabwe currently imports table eggs and exports day-old layer chicks. However, proper training in commercial egg production – from animal husbandry to health management to marketing – would be a boon to farmers' incomes and nutrition.

What FAO Zimbabwe is doing

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been piloting a project in six districts since May 2011 to show smallholder farmers how they can participate in commercial livestock farming through planned production and marketing. To kick-start egg production, FAO provides farmers with the initial point of lay birds – hens that are typically 21 weeks – egg trays,

egg layer concentrate to mix with grain, water troughs and essential drugs. Farmers, on the other hand, provide the fowl pens, maize grain and labour. The project is testing and assessing two different production systems – intensive (cage) and semi-intensive (deep litter). It is also helping to link farmers up with input and output dealers.

Impact on farmers' lives

Commercial egg production in Zimbabwe not only provides regular income to households but contributes to a diversified diet. Both men and women are involved in the business. The cage system, in particular, is in demand as it provides good results and reduces the risk of disease to the birds. Demand for eggs is good and farmers have been able to earn an average of USD 42 per month from the egg enterprise alone. This has encouraged them to expand their production, either by buying more point of lay birds or by raising broiler birds to sell meat to boost cash flows for reinvestment. Farmers are also using the manure from the layer birds for their food crops.

Commodity associations have been set up at various project sites, helping to facilitate the pooling of resources, marketing of produce and training in layer bird husbandry. The project is also promoting a savings culture among



"Egg production is set to become one of the leading enterprises driving rural economies in Zimbabwe's smallholder sector. Communities have really taken to it and are expanding the business significantly."

rural farmers. Many farmers have opened bank accounts and are now developing budgets and longer-term plans for their businesses and household needs.

Challenges

Not having a ready supply of point of lay birds is one of the project's biggest challenges as it derails momentum. Farmers need to be able to replace aging layer birds at the right stage so as not to lose the market. Stronger links with the day-old layer chick producers are vital. Another challenge is location. Stock feed and veterinary drugs are usually in urban centres, which can make it difficult for rural farmers to get what they need, when they need it. Local agrodealers are being encouraged to supply egg production inputs at competitive prices to help stimulate enterprise growth. Also, urban markets are not always the best option for smallholder farmers because of transport, packaging, commission and selling costs.

Lessons

Farmers, seeing tangible results from the pilot project, have been motivated to scale up their egg production enterprises to meet market demand. Agricultural extension systems have become more responsive thanks to the business nature of producing eggs. Egg production is less capital and labour intensive and can be easily integrated with most other farming ventures. Hybrid birds can be reared in various climatic conditions. There has been a considerable ripple effect; farmers outside of the project have taken up commercial egg production, forming groups for training and other activities.

What next?

Income-generating projects with quick returns can go a long way to improving the livelihoods of farmers and communities in Zimbabwe. There has been great uptake of commercial egg production in the pilot project areas. Now it is important to keep that momentum going. Farmers need regular training and refresher courses on everything from best practices in egg production to business skills to negotiating of marketing contracts. The capacity of Government extension staff needs to be strengthened. Stock feed and drug input dealerships need to be brought closer to the farmers through input and output market linkages facilitated by the commodity associations. Efforts should be made to integrate or collaborate with other farmer groups engaged in complimentary enterprises, like conservation agriculture. And, it is important that farmers have reliable financing sources so they can continue to grow their egg businesses.

FAO has engaged more farmers within the same districts and extended its support until the end of August 2012 in order to cement gains and make sure the business model structures are sustainable before expanding to other areas. The concept among farmers and field officers of farming as a business is also gaining steam.

Achievements to date:

- Sustainable income-generating enterprises set up in the smallholder sector
- Commodity associations in place for knowledge sharing and furthering business interests
- "Farming as a business" a reality, with budgeting and banking widely practiced
- Eggs a readily available and inexpensive source of protein
- Growing interest in commercial egg production

Partnerships / stakeholders

European Union

Cluster Agriculture Development Services

Irrigation Development, especially Divisions of Livestock Production and Development and Veterinary Fields Services

Linkages for Economic Advancement of the Disadvantaged

Lower Guruve Development Association

Ministry of Agriculture, Mechanization and

World Vision International