

Planting seeds for gender equality

Eddy Okello, like a number of other producers of traditional crops in Uganda, was heavily dependent on the Government for the reliable supply of quality seed she needed for planting. In addition to producing crops like soya bean and sesame Eddy is the chairperson of Acwec Omio Farmer's Cooperative Society (AOFCS) in Uganda, and like other members of the cooperative, she lived at a subsistence level.

This was not always the case. Initially the seeds, generated by Government seed institutions, were of a high quality. They were verified at respective variety testing centres before they reached the farmers. However, a collapse of the government seed institutions, political crises and privatisation led to the disbanding of this supply system.

As a result small-holder farmers, like Eddy, are said to obtain 20% of their seed from the formal system in Uganda, while 80% are said to access their seed through the informal system¹ that has evolved as a result of the situation. And the performance of the seed from the informal sector leaves a lot to be desired.

Although the government recognises both the formal and informal seed sectors the Government's capacity to support these sectors is limited.

More women more crops

Despite these circumstances Oilseed production is still one of the most vibrant and promising business sectors in Uganda and investing in the sector could have tremendous socio-economic benefits. Not only can the availability of quality seed increase productivity and income, it can reduce risks from pests, drought and disease.

An increase in production would also create employment opportunities related to processing, and other services generated through quality seed production. Moreover, seed security leads to food security in the farming community.

Considering this potential, Equator Seeds Limited (ESL) invested in producing and distributing 1,200MT (Metric Tons) of seed to about 60,000 farmers annually. However, in 2011 Equator Seeds was distributing only 500MT of seed mainly procured from other seed companies. ESL clearly needed assistance developing inclusive and diversified seed supply chains, and SNV and its local partners worked with ESL to provide this assistance.

Our assistance was based on our Inclusive Business model. This model, developed by SNV, defines markets in terms of unmet needs or social ills and develops profitable products or services that offer solutions to those needs. They integrate smallholder farmers, who manage about 85% of the world's farm and support roughly 2.2 billion people, in their supply chain. This creates an equitable and mutually dependent relationship, and results in economic benefits for both.

One of the key aspects of this model is to increase the participation of women. Research shows that if women had the same access to productive resources as men, they could increase yields on their farms by 20 to 30% (FAO, 2011). And increasing women's share of family incomes contributes more to household food and nutrition security. This approach, based on SNV's 'Balancing Benefits in Agriculture', has successfully been applied across multiple solutions, integrating food, nutrition and climate resilience

Based on the Inclusive Business model, if quality seeds were made available to over 12,000 farmers in Northern Uganda, and the percentage of women were increased to 45%, the farmers would realise increased productivity. There would be a rise in jobs and incomes for the smallholder farmers engaged in ESL's seed production. While the promotion of a community based seed production can be used to boost the supply of quality seed it requires training, monitoring and evaluation.

¹ (USTA)

Three-steps to success

In order to address ESL's challenges, SNV piloted an inclusive seed multiplication intervention. The aim of this intervention was to work with smallholders to multiply high yielding, fast maturing, disease resistant and high oil content varieties of soya bean as well as sesame seed varieties. This was accompanied by tailored training for value chain actors to fill the gaps in the value chain - including those in management and bookkeeping.

Working together with ESL, SNV and AFSRT (SNV's local capacity builder in Uganda), developed an inclusive seed multiplication chain that goes both downstream and upstream. The three-step strategic activities of AFSRT include: demonstration learning sites and training, Business Plan development, and business-to-business linkages.

In the first step, the demonstration focused on introducing and familiarising the participating seed growers with the standard practices for seed production. The farmers were trained on ensuring optimal plant population, effective crop management and pest, disease and weed control measures. Of the 200 seed growers trained by the AFSRT field officers 80% were women.

"Equator Seeds took the time to teach us about their seeds." said Luck from Acwec Omio, a mother of 8, who after the training, no longer struggles to keep all her children in school.

Furthermore, as a result of this training, during an annual review meeting ESL confirmed that the quality of seed bought from participating cooperatives was of the highest quality with a 98% germination rate despite the short drought experienced during the season.

As part of the second step, AFSRT helped ESL develop product specific business plans that show production projections, required financial resources, agro-input demand projections and an inventory of existing production resources such as land and labour.

In the last step, business linkages, AFSRT provided support to the farmer cooperatives to secure contracts with private buyers. As farmers need to produce high quality products that meet market requirements, they need help to secure and maintain ties with suitable buyers - including ESL themselves. As a result, farmers were able to negotiate ESL's buying price at 25% above the market price of soya bean grains, given the extra labour hours required for seed production.

Eddy Okello, who at the start of the project was struggling to make ends meet and maintain a sustainable farm, after the introduction of inclusive business, was able to harvest 26 bags of high quality soya bean seeds in the first season of production in 2014. She realised UGX 4,056,000 from its sale. As a result of this marked increase in her income she plans to buy a tractor to further improve her seed production.

Reaping the benefits

Incomes generated in the two years of this intervention have been estimated at USD \$77,000 with women benefitting from 40% of this total.

"In this second season I planted 8 acres of simsim (sesame) and 4 acres of maize and 12 acres of soya. If all goes well I am expecting to get above 24 million shillings," said Eddy Okello.

As evidenced by Eddy's growth, the per capita incomes multiplied by the number of farmers in Acwec Omio (65% of whom are women) can have a significant impact on the economic empowerment of women.

Going forward, as more companies seek to replicate this model, farmers will need support in efficiently managing multiple contracts and support to ensure sustainable production. Facing higher competition seed companies will have to offer farmers good incentives to multiply their seed or grain over their competitors. As farmer incomes increase they will also need to be supported, trained and sensitized on personal financial management.

Based on our experience, inclusive seed multiplication has the potential to transform northern Uganda. Plus farmers, particularly women, can realise improved economic benefits of their labour and at the same time fundamentally address the challenges of access to quality seed.

as a **result** of training:

