

Strengthening farmers organizations

The experience of RELMA and ULAMP

Millie Biruma Abaru, Anthony Nyakuni and Gideon Shone

East Africa



World Agroforestry Centre
TRANSFORMING LIVES AND LANDSCAPES

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Tel: +254(0)20 7224000, via USA +1 650 833 6645
Fax: +254(0)20 7224001, via USA +1 650 833 6646
Email: icraf@cgiar.org
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About the authors

Millie Biruma Abaru, Social Economy Advisor RELMA,
World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF),
P.O. Box 60677 00100, Nairobi 00100, Kenya

Anthony Nyakuni, Previously Project coordinator ULAMP, Uganda

Gideon Shone, Rural Development Advisor, RELMA

Abstract

The paper discusses the experiences of the Regional Land Management Unit (RELMA), working with other project funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), in promoting viable and sustainable farmers organizations in East Africa in the face of liberalization and institutional reforms. The paper draws out some lessons on how and why farmers' organizations work.

Before the shift in policy, cooperatives thrived. However, they failed to adjust and compete in the liberalized economies and many collapsed. RELMA tried out ways to promote strong and vibrant grassroots farmers' organizations to give farmers opportunities to participate in the development process. The authors found that, among other factors, farmers' organizations to bind together, the process of establishing them must be gradual. This allows time for members to self-select themselves and develop their own vision. In addition, the process should be supported by favourable policies and extension services that respond to demand. It is shown that farmers' organizations that are small and homogenous, mobilize their own resources and produce a marketable product continue to grow as common interest groups and join up into inter-group associations even after the departure of RELMA and its collaborators.

Keywords: RELMA, Sida, Farmers Organizations, Common Interest Group, marketing, Savings and credit, agriculture.

Acronyms

CBA – community based advisors

CIG – Common Interest Group

FOs – farmers’ organizations

NAADS - National Agricultural Advisory Services

IGA – inter-group association

NALEP - National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Programme

SCAPA - Soil Conservation and Agroforestry Programme in Arusha

Sida- Swedish International Development Agency

SMS - subject matter specialist

ULAMP - Uganda Land Management Programme

RELMA- Regional Land Management Unit

Acronyms	5
Background	1
The problem	2
RELMA's Response.....	4
The Uganda experience.....	5
The Tanzania case.....	14
Kenya's experience.....	16
Ethiopia.....	17
Impacts: With examples from ULAMP.....	18
Development of authentic grassroots farmers organizations.....	18
Capacity building among farmers.....	19
Promoting market-oriented production.....	19
Promoting savings and credit.....	19
Creation of social capital	20
Changed mindset of extension service providers.....	20
Contribution to the national extension policy.....	20
Influencing rural development.....	21
Increased transparency.....	21
Gender mainstreaming	21
Gaps and opportunities for intervention	21
Policies and laws.....	21
Production and market linkages.....	22
Development and dissemination of extension materials.....	22
Promotion of a savings culture	22
Emerging challenges and next steps.....	23
Conclusion	24
Appendix: Impressions from the field.....	25
References.....	29
Working papers in this series.....	31

Background

As the East African countries pursue economic liberalization, the respective governments have started on working on plans to modernize agriculture. The sector is seen as the key to growth of the region's predominantly rural economy, reducing poverty and improving the welfare of a majority of the people.

New policies focus on increased and sustainable food production. This can be achieved by improving agricultural techniques and practices, optimal use of land and water resources, increasing production of high-value commodities, and gradually commercialising agriculture in collaboration with the private sector.

Modernising agriculture is, however, a complex and demanding task for policy makers, agricultural scientists, and donors (Eicher 1999). Governments and development partners agree on the importance of inclusiveness and authentic participation and involvement of farmers in development, in agriculture in particular. However, there are various challenges to achieving this goal.

One arises from the reduced role of government in service provision following economic liberalization and institutional reforms. Farmers are now required to take over some of the roles previously played by governments but may not be equipped to do so. To take charge, farmers need to be well organised in strong organizations that can influence policies and help them benefit from emerging markets.

Another challenge relates to delivery of extension services. In the countries RELMA covered, rural development was linked with agriculture and livestock extension services. Successful intervention required that RELMA re-examine some aspects of extension services and approaches, and, more importantly, find entry points to effectively work with small-scale farmers.

In this paper, we share the experiences and challenges of organizing farmers in sustainable groups in the face of liberalization in four eastern Africa countries: Uganda (used as a case study), Kenya, Tanzania and Ethiopia.

The RELMA programme, which ends in 2006, was operating in the region at a time (1999-2004) when countries were making major policy shifts. It therefore had to address a number of problems arising from the changes, some of which are far-reaching.

The problem

Weak farmers' organizations

Before the era of liberalization, cooperatives thrived as the main farmers' organizations in eastern Africa. However, most cooperatives could not compete in open-market economies and are today weak, dormant or dead (World Bank 1995). With the decline of cooperatives and other farmers' organizations, many farmers lack a collective voice. They cannot to access affordable production inputs such as finance, technology, land and water, and are locked out of markets. As a result, a large number of small-scale farmers live in poverty and cannot influence policies that affect their livelihoods.

Strong and vibrant farmers' organizations can provide opportunities to farmers to effectively play a role in the market economy and benefit from it. However, identifying and promoting authentic farmers' organizations that empower smallholders, is a big challenge for governments and their development partners. Most groups are hastily formed, often with no regard for the social-cultural and economic structures of the farming communities. Such groups are not viable and incapable of serving as channels through which farmers can take part in decision-making.

Lack of economies of scale

Closely related to the problem of weak organizations is a fragmented and small-scale pattern of production. Farmers are not only scattered geographically, but often produce for subsistence or far below potential. Many are locked in a vicious circle of poverty. Extension services in the region compounded the problem by emphasizing support to individual farmers instead of groups that would provide better opportunities to use limited resources more effectively and efficiently.

Production not market oriented

Small-scale farmers mainly aim to increase production and achieve food self-sufficiency, rather than producing for the market and making a profit. This problem could be partly due to the fact that different departments outside agricultural extension are responsible for marketing, processing and value addition of farm produce.

Technology vs social organization

Agricultural extension has emphasized the promotion of technologies that improve production rather than developing institutional arrangements to encourage the adoption of such technologies.

Partial application of “participatory methods”

Although many of the countries that had RELMA programmes used participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and other “participatory” methodologies to identify farmers’ needs, in most cases extension services promoted what was centrally identified as “good”. There little regard to the farmers’ socio-economic realities and their felt needs. This left little room for subject matter specialists to improvise solutions to challenges facing farmers. The FO approach could correct this it is bottom-up and capable of bringing about greater transparency and accountability in the development process (Hussein 2000).

Disharmony in development extension

In traditional extension approaches, the complex development needs of farmers were not addressed in a holistic manner. For example, community development, veterinary, crop production, marketing and other services were scattered in different departments or ministries. At the field level, the agents of these technical departments operated independently of each other and often gave disconnected or conflicting messages.

Poor farmer-extension-research linkages

Links between farmers, extension services and research are weak, partly because the limitations of farmers’ organizations translate into inadequate representation in agricultural research and limited access to extension (IFAP 1995). Well organized farmers’ groups and improved communication among them with researchers and extension workers can help overcome this problem and focus efforts of all on solving farmers’ problems.

Extension messages not matched with farmers’ incomes

In many instances, individual farmers cannot afford the technologies promoted. However, if organized in groups, they can pool resources and gradually help one another adopt such technology.

RELMA's Response

Soon after it emerged from the Regional Soil Conservation Unit in 1998, RELMA expanded its team to include a more diverse pool of technical experts. It then developed a holistic/integrated approach to development, making use of the varied expertise.

In subsequent years, RELMA used Sida-funded projects as “pathfinders” to develop a broader participatory approach to rural development that empowers farmers’ organizations so that they could own the development process as well as lobby and influence policy.

RELMA used a multi-disciplinary participatory approach based on organizing farmers and service providers to address various problems, including those cited above, to enhance development by promoting authentic farmers’ organizations founded on strong Common Interest Groups (CIG).

This CIG-based approach aimed to:

- Promote participatory methods that enable extension service providers play an active but catalytic role in identifying potentials, opportunities and appropriate enterprises for common interest groups, i.e. to stir and respond to demand.
- Increase the outreach of extension services through the CIGs.
- Strengthen and empower the CIGs to overcome the problem of diseconomy of scale.
- Bring together CIGs as building blocks for strong apex or national farmers’ organizations. Approaches to promoting sustainable farmers’ organizations.

RELMA worked in partnership with national institutions, mostly the ministries of agriculture, higher learning institutions as well as other projects funded by Sida. The projects included Uganda Land Management Programme (ULAMP) and Agrisystems in Uganda, the Soil Conservation and Agroforestry Programme in Arusha (SCAPA), Tanzania, and Kenya’s National Soil and water Conservation programme (NSWC).

To ensure ownership, RELMA:

- responded to demand from national institutions and projects;
- ensured programmes were in line with country plans for agricultural development;
- served as a catalyst by developing and packaging the idea, leaving national institutions to lead in introducing and promoting technologies to farmers on the ground; and
- facilitated interactive needs assessment, planning and training to accommodate the diverse interests and social-political set-ups.

RELMA supported short training courses, study tours and regional workshops that encouraged cross-fertilization of ideas and exchange of experiences among extension staffs, farmers and institutions in the member countries. The programme also developed and disseminated extension materials (IIRR 2006). In addition, RELMA was proactive in identifying and networking with relevant institutions.

These approaches enabled RELMA to operate effectively -- with a small staff covering large areas -- while promoting ownership and building confidence in national institutions.

Uganda is a good example of how the CIG approach was introduced, tested on the ground, adapted to the local situation, and eventually mainstreamed into the national approach to modernize agriculture. In the following sections we discuss the RELMA/ULAMP experience based on a detailed study conducted in February and June 2006. The country's case is then compared to experiences of three other countries in which RELMA worked.

The Uganda experience

Uganda offered the best opportunity for the emerging CIG concept. The experience started in 1998/9, when the Uganda Soil Conservation and Agroforestry Programme (USCAP) in the greater Mbarara District (includes Mbarara, Ibanda, Isingiro and Kiruhwa Districts) was phasing out to give way to the Uganda Land Management Programme (ULAMP). During the transition, RELMA played an active role in the design of the new project and helped build into it a broad-based participatory extension approach based on the CIG concept.

ULAMP was a multidisciplinary project funded by Sida and implemented by the district Local Governments (LG). Like RELMA, ULAMP aimed to improve food security and incomes of small-scale land users. ULAMP was attached to the District Production Office but worked with a core team of subject matter specialists to lead in the key areas of development. It is in this set-up that ULAMP and its partners piloted

the common interest groups approach in greater Mbarara, Kabarole, Kapchorwa and Arua districts between 1999 and 2004. The process used useful insights and lessons in strengthening of farmers' organizations.

RELMA started by organizing training workshops for key subject matter specialists (SMS) to prepare them for the changed role of extension services and to introduce to them the CIG approach.

The next step was to harmonize extension messages. RELMA brought together a multi-disciplinary team to prepare a 'menu of offer of services'. The menu contained a collection of enterprises and development interventions that farmers could undertake and how to do them. Preparing the menu of offers gave specialists an opportunity to re-examine and harmonize the messages for farmers. The process of fine-tuning messages also helped to reveal how different sectors were inter-connected.

To help in selection of profitable enterprises, RELMA supported the development of a cost-benefit analysis guide (IIRR, 2006) as well as extension and technical manuals on the different interventions in the menu.

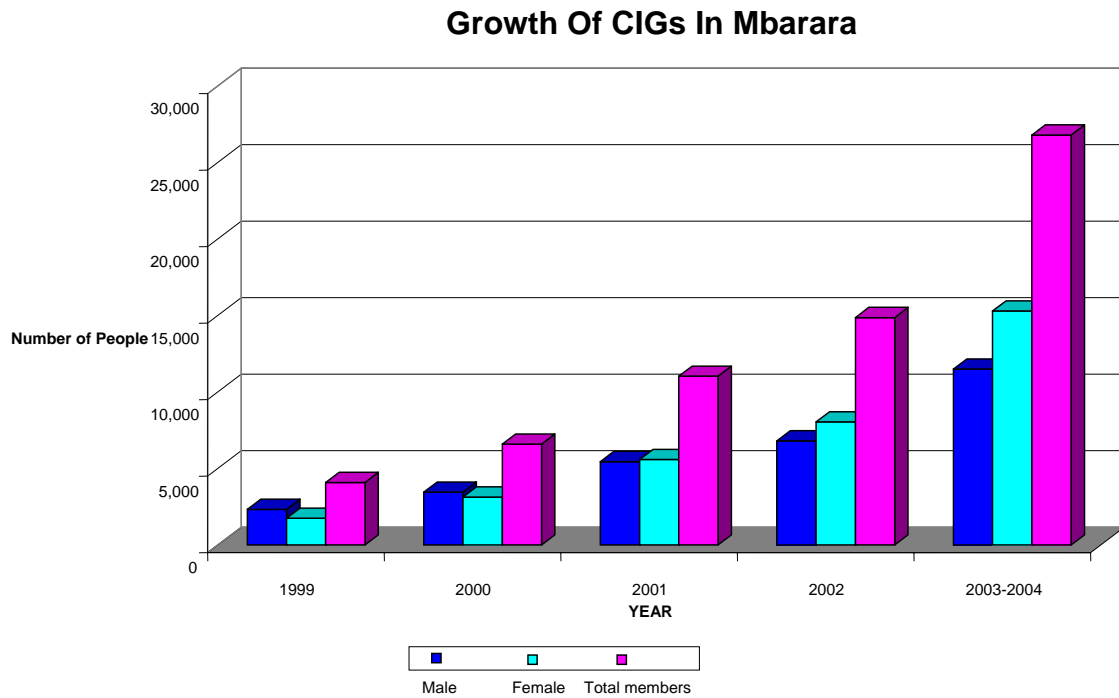
Box 1 Process for establishing CIGs

- Community level needs assessment and situation analysis.
- Community needs and aspirations prioritized.
- Farmers organized into common interest groups (CIGs).
- CIGs elect group officials.
- CIGs develop group goals and objectives, and select priority enterprises.
- CIGs carry out participatory planning and develop work plans.
- Formulation of rules and regulations.

A participatory situation analysis, needs and opportunity assessment was carried out in communities using PRA tools. The survey showed the farmers' real situations, their preferences and possible solutions to common problems. The process led to the formation of groups around shared problems, interests, needs and potentials.

Farmers voluntarily joined the common interest groups. The group then identified an income-generating enterprise, drew up by-laws, elected leaders and drew up work-plans. Figure 1 shows that by the end of 2004, a total of 26,792 farmers had joined about 1,139 CIGs in 56 parishes in the greater Mbarara District.

Figure 1



At the start of the programme, the average CIG had 10-15 members, but by June 2006, this number had increased to 25, a figure considered too high allow efficient member participation.

Additionally, figure1 shows that while initially there were more men than women in CIGs, the equation changed from 2001. By June 2004, 57% of CIG members were women.

One explanation is that men are opportunistic. They often take advantage of new ideas hoping to get big benefits in a short time, but quit if their expectations are not met. Another is that most of the technologies and activities, such as water harvesting and horticulture, groups chose benefited women more than men. The men

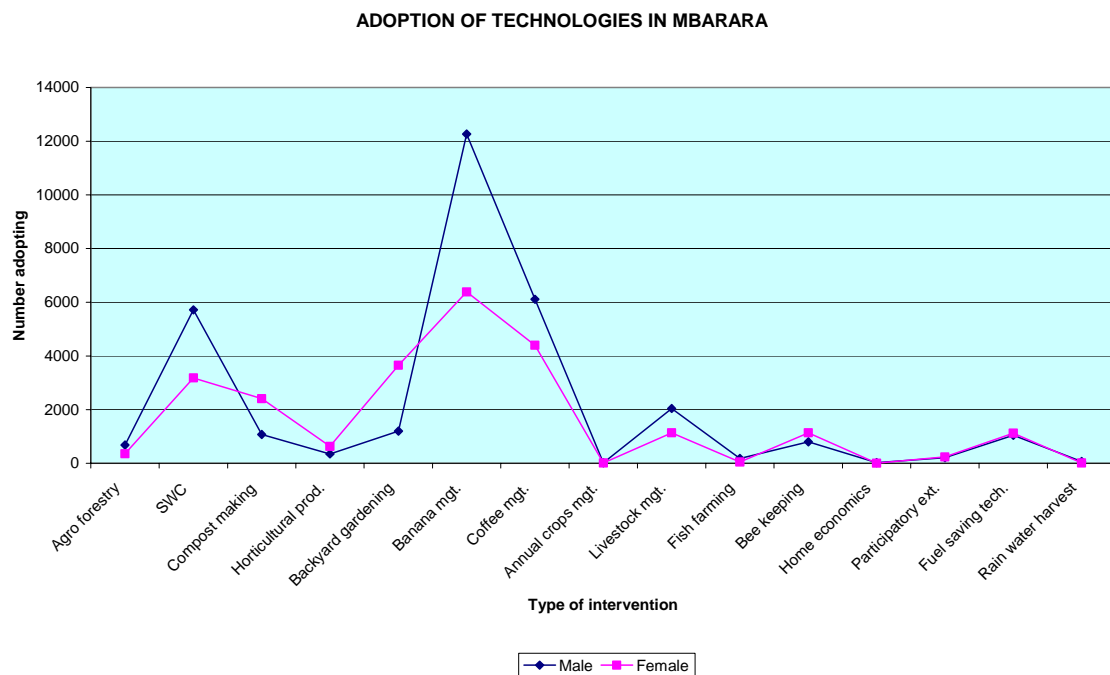
were more interested in technologies that increased their incomes such as bananas production or those that require heavy manual labour.

Nature of enterprises

CIGs often carry out multiple activities and enterprises that are complementary, but the common goal is to produce and find a market for the produce. In Mbarara (figure 2) the main enterprises undertaken by CIGs were banana production, livestock rearing, growing of annual crops (mainly maize, beans, millet), and vegetables. Fish farming, beekeeping and fruit production are also popular.

Banana production was by far the most successful enterprise. Some farmers' records¹ show that because of improved crop husbandry, yields of banana, the major staple food and cash crop, have increased substantially, up to threefold in some farms. This supports FAO findings that technologies that build on and complement local knowledge tend to be particularly effective in meeting the needs of poor farmers (Pingali et al 2006).

Figure 2



Other cross-cutting technologies that such as land resources conservation, backyard gardening, home management, fuel wood saving technologies, food processing, are integrated with the various key enterprises.

In addition, CIGs are involved in savings and credit schemes, joint purchase of inputs, marketing of banana and milk, handicraft making, construction of rainwater harvesting tanks for domestic and farm use, building of permanent houses for members, and rehabilitation of degraded land.

Usually, after agreeing on a marketable enterprise and getting the necessary skills – such as bookkeeping, group management and group dynamics and leadership -- CIGs became more cohesive and confident working together.

¹ From record kept by farmer Kasimire Fransis of Kaanama Modern Group (CIG), BuUShe Sub-county, Nyakatoogye Parish

The groups that reach maturity are those that:

- have a constitution and rules that have been developed by members and are understood by all;
- have members trained in group management and visionary leaders;
- regularly monitor their enterprises;
- grade performance and encourage competition among members; and
- have a produce that they market as well as a functioning savings and credit scheme.

Successful groups have a strong degree of autonomy and qualify to move to the next level, of forming an Inter-Group Association (IGA).

IGA charge a membership fee and commission on produce they Markey for member CIGs. They also gather market information and business contacts from the District Trade Office, NGOs and private traders, and communicate it to their members.

In addition, CIGs are encouraged to save with the IGA. Such savings increases the members' stakes in the IGA and improve their chances of members getting credit from micro-finance organizations and marketing agents. This contributes to the sustainability of the IGA.

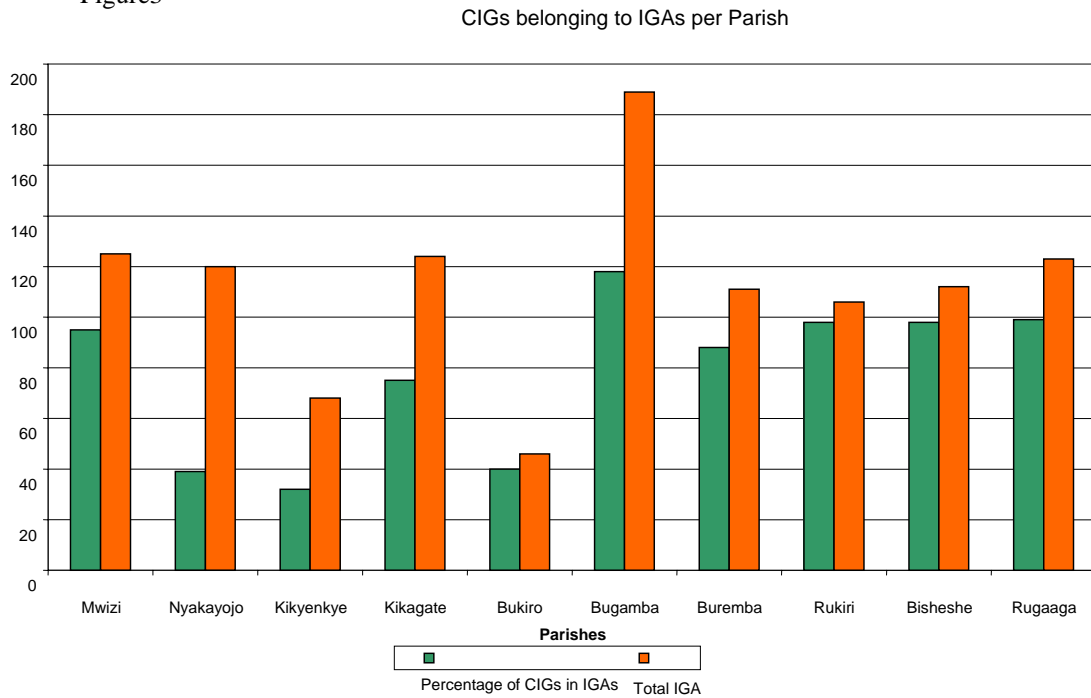
Another advantage is that when CIGs come together, it becomes easier to train them in value addition and other activities.

Formation of federations

Looking at the development of IGAs in 10 sub-counties in Mbarara, Figure 3 shows that each of the 56 parishes had an IGA. In general, only 70% of the groups formed federated to form inter-group associations. There are many reasons why 30% are not members of the IGA. For instance, moving to the IGA level is a gradual process that takes time. Normally it is not hurried because first of all, CIGs have to save to become members of IGA. For the CIGs to save, members ought to have bonded well enough and to trust one another with money.

Figure 3 shows Bugamba sub-county has the highest number of CIGs, but only 62% of these have joined the IGAs. Buremba and Rukiri sub-counties, on the other hand, have older CIGs whose members have gained confidence in one another and mobilized savings. As a result, 95% of the CIG belong to an IGA.

Figure 3

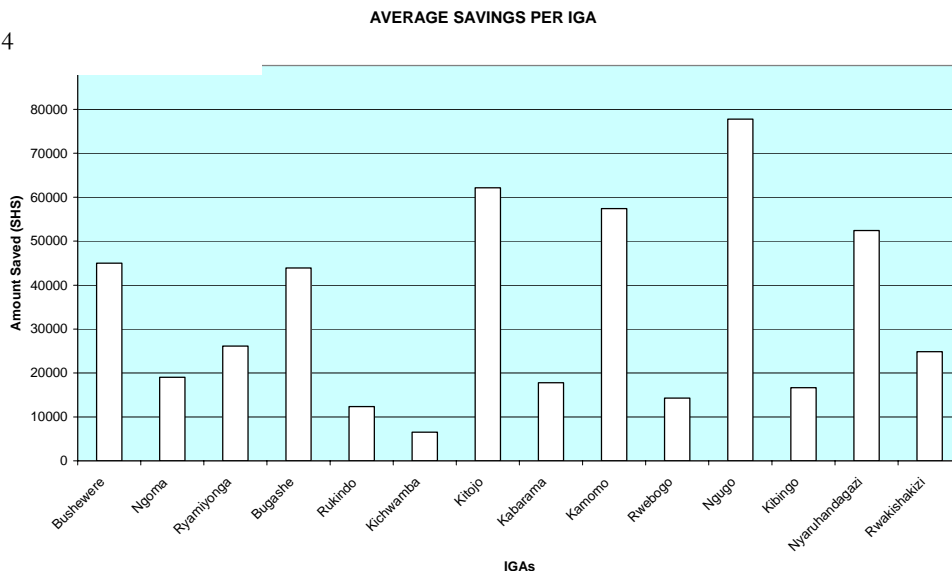


Levels of savings

One of the signs of maturity and sustainability is an IGA’s ability to mobilise members’ savings (Mutua et al 1996). Figure 4 shows the average savings for IGAs to be about US\$ 34,000 (USD 20).

This average is fairly low and yet only 39% of the IGAs examined had saved above it by February 2006. One of the reasons given for this low figure is that many of the IGAs were new and members needed more time to bond and learn how best to work together. Sensitization and training of members in group savings, book keeping and other areas that help to build this trust also takes time.

Figure 4



Other reasons for the low savings include the following:

- Some of the inter-group associations lacked a marketing strategy. Those with above-average savings have marketing plans and continue to be trained by Techno-serve and a new Government programme, the National Agricultural Advisory Services (the NAADS) on how to market their produce.
- Rural people save in various forms, financial and non-financial, formal and informal (Deshpande and Pickens 2006). While some of the IGA only reported cash savings, some members have livestock, bicycles, radios and other assets that they can sell when they need cash.
- The survey was done in February, considered a time of borrowing rather than saving firstly because it falls in the middle of the dry season when there is little produce from farms for sale. Secondly, February comes just after the opening of schools for the first term when farmers pay the most fees. Furthermore, farmers have not fully recovered from the high expenses of the December holidays.
- Some of the associations with the lowest savings, such as Kichwamba, are in mountainous areas with limited access to the markets and where poor communication makes it difficult for members to meet regularly to mobilize savings.

Overall, however, most of the groups, even those with low savings, have been selected to take part in the NAADS programme because they are already well-organized. The savings they have, however little, demonstrate members' willingness to save and their ability to share costs of training and technologies.

The loan repayment rates have been impressive so far, 99%. The groups attributed this to peer pressure, effective monitoring (within the group and of the group by others) and increased ability of group members to pay. Elsewhere in Uganda, RELMA experience shows that defaulting is higher in organizations that lack solidarity and strong rules to safeguard their savings than in those that are close-knit and well managed. This was the case in Kumi District, where some organizations weakened (Abaru 2006).

Threats to group growth of groups

Despite the success in the formation of farmers' organizations, there were problems. For example, it was difficult to convince some of the farmers to join groups because of past failures of farmers' organizations. In a few cases, unhealthy competition for leadership

positions or opportunistic people who introduced politics threatened to derail groups. Another concern was that sometimes members failed to raise subscription fees and their savings on time.

Conditions for sustainability

Sustainability of farmers' organizations, in this case the CIG and IGA, is not only based on their ability to mobilize savings, but also on other factors that contribute to the strength of the glue that binds farmers organizations together. These factors include a committed leadership that is willing to champion the case of farmers in different forums. While dynamic leaders can carry an FO at the beginning, longer-term survival depends on well-understood rules and procedures. It is important that members get involved in drawing up rules as well as setting penalties for those who violate these regulations. In addition, the rules of successful groups are defined such that members clearly understand their roles and responsibilities in the group. Due to the homogeneity of groups, it is easy for the members to monitor one another, resolve conflicts, reduce the problems of asymmetric information in the groups and to increase transparency and accountability in the way things are done. In addition, CIGs promote competition and regular grading of the performance of members.

Another seed of sustainability for the farmers' organizations is focus on producing for the markets. At the start, FOs produce products that they have the best experience, this makes production for the markets easier. Availability of market opportunities and the demand for high quality produce makes members to work hard and support one another to meet the required market standards.

The policy environment: Constraints and opportunities

The policy environment in Uganda is generally considered to be encouraging to the development of farmers' organizations. During various forums, the CIGs and IGA pointed some of the positive policies.

Decentralization: Formation of Local Authorities was designed to devolve powers and responsibilities for administration, planning and finance to the local levels (Ahikire, 2002). This allows the local community including FOs, to be involved and to have a say in the development of their local areas.

Decentralization in government triggered a similar shift in farmers' organizations which had been highly centralized and lacked transparency and accountability. For example, the Uganda Cooperatives Alliance now allows direct membership of CIGs (primary) as well as IGA (union).

Extension services: The new Uganda extension policy that created NAADS support demand-driven and farmer-led agricultural service delivery (NAADS 2000). It aims to empower farmers by encouraging them to work together and build their demand for both research and agricultural advisory services. Often, the initial entry points for NAADS are the already existing well-organized groups such as those formed with RELMA/ULAMP support.

Micro-credit: After a number of bank failures starting 1999, the government in 2002 put in place a Micro Deposit-Taking Institutions Bill that provides for the regulation and supervision of banks serving the poor (Deshpande and Pickens 2006). As a result, farmers' organizations have regained confidence in the financial system, especially village banks and credit groups, because the safety of their savings is assured.

Liberalization: Opening up of markets has allowed individuals and groups to sell produce independently rather than through the inefficient marketing boards. Although removal of the boards exposes farmers to the risk of exploitation by traders, they get paid on time. Some farmers have indicated that the risk of exploitation has encouraged them to be better organized and push for higher prices. Some of the groups have already demonstrated this by attracting better prices for their bananas, goats and honey.

Lessons from the Uganda experience

- It is possible to transform farmers' organizations from being instruments of government policy into business-oriented organizations that serve members' needs.
- A proper situation analysis and needs assessment creates a better understanding of the situation of farmers and development workers.
- Farmers' organizations are capable of analyzing their own problems in light of their own needs and priorities, and seeking solutions.
- Supporting communities to organize into viable institutions fosters community and group action to advance rural development.
- Promoting authentic farmers' organizations increases their ability to influence development in their areas and promote democracy.
- Mobilising savings increases the autonomy, internal bonding and sustainability of FOs.

- Availability of a marketable product or service contributes to the viability of FOs and is an effective tool for changing attitudes and binding FOs.
- The support of civic and opinion leaders is crucial for the success of CIGs. In sub-counties where the civic and community leaders facilitated the implementation process, more farmers took up new technologies.
- It is possible to mainstream gender in development through groups and by encouraging women to take up leadership roles in communities.
- The capacity of CIGs and the support institutions, especially extension services, should be built to enable them make informed decisions and carry out continuous re-planning to effectively adjust to changing conditions and take advantage of emerging opportunities.
- Up-scaling of CIG formation should be gradual, carefully done and systematic, based on the capacity of the communities. The use of bottom-up institutional development techniques has been instrumental in the success of groups.

The Tanzania case

In Tanzania, the effort to introduce CIGs was limited to the districts of Arumeru and Arusha, where RELMA partnered with SCAPA. Although SCAPA was a soil conservation and Agroforestry project, extension staffs in agriculture, livestock, water and natural resource sectors were involved in introducing the concept

Like in the Uganda case, RELMA organized training courses for subject matter specialists, who then came together to develop a menu of offers for common interest groups. The main technologies on offer were conservation tillage, rainwater harvesting, poultry and home gardening.

Initially groups were helped to develop tailor-made group constitutions to guide them through with the implementation.

Farmer-to-farmer training

To encourage more farmers to form groups and to strengthen existing ones, RELMA introduced holistic farmer-to-farmer training in 2002. In a slight modification of the

Uganda approach, a few farmers from each group were trained in different but inter-related interventions to improve land management and food security. The farmers were encouraged to train fellow group members and other groups around them.

Cost-sharing

Ability to help meet the cost of activities was a key condition in selection of groups for the programme. Groups also had to involve both men and women, be open to new members and have the potential for impact, among other criteria.

The sharing of costs spread out training expenses, helped reduce donor dependence and improved ownership of the intervention. The gender requirement ensured that men and women had access to extension workers with different competencies, while being at one site encouraged farmers to exchange ideas.

After the SCAPA project ended in 2003, RELMA did not continue with the project's extension approach. Detailed up-to-date data on the groups was not readily available, but it was ascertained that conservation tillage groups and some women's groups in the Ngorobob area continue with water harvesting.

Lessons from the Tanzania experience

Despite its limited coverage and lifespan, the Tanzania case nevertheless provided valuable lessons:

- To promote sustainable farmers' organizations, it is important that the initial focus be on developing the group and a marketable product, not the other way round. In Uganda, RELMA started with strengthening the FOs and then flagged the menu of offers for the groups. In Tanzania, the menu was flagged first then groups formed around an activity.
- Respect for social-cultural and political issues is important. Among the Maasai, the main inhabitants of the districts SCAPA covered, tradition does not allow men and women to mix as equal participants in meetings and other activities. Training helped to strengthen gender-mainstreaming practices, while identifying and overcoming systemic barriers against women.
- The level at which the CIG idea is introduced matters. While in Uganda the entry point was at district level, the project had national

political backing and was embedded in Ministry of Agriculture programmes. In Tanzania, however, the approach was introduced at a very low level and had a weak link to the Ministry of Agriculture. The district officials that played a big role lacked the necessary support and flexibility to promote the process after the SCAPA/RELMA exit.

Kenya's experience

In Kenya, RELMA piloted the participatory approach based on CIG in the three districts: Machakos, Makueni and Meru. The beginning was similar to that in Uganda and Tanzania.

However, unlike in Uganda and Tanzania, rainwater harvesting was the entry point used to attract the interest of communities in Machakos and Makueni, both dryland districts that experience frequent drought and severe water shortage.

After coming together to solve water problems, community groups were exposed to a menu of offers comprising various enterprises. These included selected homestead management, backyard vegetable production using drip irrigation and other techniques that maximise the use of water, improved kitchens with fuel-saving stoves, home economics and hygiene, poultry, small stock husbandry, and growing of trees, including fruit trees.

Some of the technologies have brought significant change to groups. For instance in Kavilo, Makueni, women's groups have pooled their own resources to construct a weir across a seasonal stream and pipe water to irrigate their horticulture farms and tree nurseries for Agroforestry. Youth groups have also benefited by establishing vegetable gardens and tree nurseries using drip irrigation.

Although training in the various enterprises, especially in value-addition and home economics, became popular outside the initial target area, the group concept did not spread as much. This was like in Tanzania.

However, the National Agriculture and Livestock Extension Programme (NALEP) has now taken up the CIG approach as the main tool for organizing rural development closely using the RELMA/ULAMP but adopting it to the Kenya social cultural and political set-ups.

A recent impact assessment report for NALEP (May 22, 2006) underlines the importance attached to the extension approach. States the report: "It is a common theme running through the NALEP concept that groups formed around a common

purpose, are the most cost-effective manner in which to guarantee sustainable development over the long run in the agricultural sector.”

Lessons from Kenya

The introduction of the CIG approach in Kenya was not well connected at the right level to national institutions to spread beyond the initial districts after RELMA’s exit.

In addition, the approach was introduced during the transition from NSCP to NALEP and could not get sufficient attention.

Ethiopia

RELMA inherited a pilot project in Axum, Tigray Region, from the Regional Soil Conservation Unit. Just before the pilot project was phased out, efforts were made to introduce the CIG-based extension approach.

Initially, the prevailing extension system was too inflexible to allow changes. However, later on, in 2001, after a regional workshop on the CIG approach in Arusha in 2000, matters changed. The Extension Department of the Federal Government and RELMA began to test the approach at Wolinchiti, a low-rainfall area in the Rift Valley. Subject matter specialists from national level and the local Oromia region were involved.

From the menu of offers, most groups preferred rainwater harvesting for domestic and homestead gardening, homestead improvement and poultry farming. Group members were trained in these areas as well as in constitution-making for the group, leadership and planning.

Underground tanks suitable for harvesting runoff for supplementary irrigation during the dry season were constructed as part of practical training for groups. Blocks made from soil and cement, which are cheaper than other form of building material, were used.

Women group were trained on establishment of home gardens using drip irrigation, vegetable preservation by drying, homestead improvement and hygiene. In addition, groups were encouraged to start a savings and credit scheme.

Ethiopia is prone to drought and the Government took a keen interest in rainwater harvesting. The rainwater harvesting group in the small village of Wolinchiti became famous as its members transformed their farms and started to grow fruit trees and vegetables in an otherwise harsh environment. The group was so successful that it was identified as a national model for promoting rainwater harvesting.

Lessons from Ethiopia

The extension approach based on CIG did not spread beyond the initial villages and surrounding areas for a number of reasons:

- The approach was introduced at the field level but not promoted at the regional or national levels. As a result, it was mainly limited to one village and the number of subject matter specialists and extension workers involved were too few to have a significance impact.
- Group development and adoption of technologies were all infused concurrently instead of group first then technology development.
- An inflexible and centralised extension system makes it difficult to change mindsets.
- It is important to grow political support for any intervention to get support after the promoter pulls out.
- Sustainable farmers' organizations are not created by governments, donors or NGOs. They arise from sustainable enterprises, which, in turn, need sustainable technologies, sustainable financing and sustainable management methods.

Impacts: With examples from ULAMP

The farmer group -based approach to providing extension services was particularly successful in Uganda and had a number of impacts as discussed below. A key indicator of success is that groups started under RELMA/ULAMP continue to thrive even after the projects' exit and more CIGs and IGAs are being formed based on the model.

Development of authentic grassroots farmers organizations

One of the reasons for the collapse of cooperatives was the lack of strong grassroots organization. The approach adopted by RELMA/ULAMP is helping to build representative farmers' organizations from the bottom-up. Although the development is so far only up to the inter-group level and the scale small, the outcomes provide an opportunity for the national farmers' organizations to link up with the federated groups and to replicate the experience in other parts of the country.

Capacity building among farmers

To ensure professionalism in FOs, 2-3 members, known as Community Based Advisors (CBA), were given specialized skills. These advisors provide technical support to their groups and to others on request, and they charge a minimum fee to cover costs. In five sub-counties previously covered by RELMA/ULAMP, the CBA have formed Farmers Trainers Associations that help in the formation of new groups and add hence increase the number of technicians in the Districts that provide extension services.

Promoting market-oriented production

The CIGs have organized joint marketing as a strategy to overcome the diseconomy of scale, attract and get better prices. The strategy is two-fold. At one level, CIGs trade part of their produce collectively by themselves, and at another they bulk their produce through the inter-group associations. The CIGs and IGAs generate revenue for themselves by charging a 10% commission on produce sold through the groups. This arrangement was applauded for increasing farmers' income and hence helped to expand the tax base for the Local Government Authorities. Presently, however, the graduated tax has been abolished.

Promoting savings and credit

Developing a savings culture is seen as the seed for autonomy of farmers' organizations and a means to overcome the chronic lack of finance and inputs for small-scale farmers. Savings not only help to finance production, but also strengthen bonding and harmony among members, as they try to safeguard one another's savings.

Most of the CIGs have improved farmers' access to capital by combining the traditional merry-go-round system with savings and credit schemes. Part of the members' monthly or weekly contributions in a merry-go round system is paid out to members in turn, while the other portion goes into a savings scheme.

The acceptance of a marketable commodity as collateral for loans has reduced barriers to credit. Although a monthly interest rate of 10% is charged on such loans, groups reported a repayment rate of 99%. The high repayment rate is partly due to peer pressure and increased ability to pay as farmers market their produce.

IGAs increase their capital base by ploughing back some of the money collected as commission on sales into the saving fund. This fund is used to buy inputs, which are then sold to members. However, some of the groups have used the savings to venture

into buying small goats that they fatten and sell for a profit after six months. Others have advanced to goat breeding to improve local stocks.

One CIG, Kaanama modern group of Nyakotooky Parish in Bisheshe Sub-County, reported a turnover of USh13.8 million (about USD 758) from the sale of 276 goats.

Creation of social capital

Beyond the economic enterprises they undertake, CIGs pool their labour to help one another on the farms, including building structures for rainwater harvesting. This has strengthened social bonds. It also provides an opportunity for members to discuss social matters. For instance, in group discussions, farmers said the formation of groups had reduced alcohol abuse, crime and domestic violence.

Groups have come up with ways to help the less privileged among them by giving out loans for school fees or building and maintaining homesteads. In some areas, they have started campaigns to ensure every household has a proper latrine, a fuel-saving kitchen and rainwater harvesting tank where water is scarce.

Changed mindset of extension service providers

Training complemented by the technical guides and manuals has improved the competence of extension service providers and changed their mindset to respond better to farmers' real needs. The training included non-traditional extension content such as group formation, business management and bookkeeping.

Joint training of extension workers and representatives of farmers' groups has improved interaction between the two groups and fostered commitment to achieve by both the farmers groups and the extension.

The process of documenting the *menu of offers* of service by the different departments offered an opportunity for the technical staff to harmonise extension messages given to the farmers and build the team work approach. The cost benefit training enabled the extension to recommend interventions that were profitable to farmers.

Contribution to the national extension policy

Although the National Agricultural Advisory Service (NAADS) model is not a direct outcome of the ULAMP, in some ways their approaches and strategy are similar and in most times complimentary. This is the case in that ULAMP promotes group formation as one of its major function while NAADS works with existing groups.

Where NAADS in formers ULAMP districts, many of the groups they initially work with are the RELMA/ULAMP groups.

After the closure of ULAMP in 2004, the coordinator was hired by the NAADS and hence the CIG-based extension approach has been incorporated in the national extension system used by NAADS.

Influencing rural development

The CIGs and IGAs work in close collaboration with the local administration. Most of the CIG members are councillors at the Village (cell), at the Parish and at the Sub-County levels. This makes it easy for farmers to voice development concerns that are relevant to the groups at the Parish and Sub-County administrative levels where decisions are made. Cost sharing is one of the requirements to access central government funds for area development. These organized farmers' groups take advantage of their saving funds plus the ease they have in mobilizing human and material resources to implement development to attract such development to their areas.

Increased transparency

Training in group dynamics, leadership skills, bookkeeping, record keeping has contributed to promotion of transparency and accountability in groups and in the local administration. This is because many of the local councillors who are members of the CIGs have benefited from this training and are said to practice improved governance

Gender mainstreaming

Providing equitable access to support services has encouraged more women to take up leadership roles, both on-farm and off-farm, and improved their entrepreneurial skills. An open membership policy has encouraged widows, bachelors and the poor to join groups. In some sub-counties, the youth have formed their own groups, which mainly grow vegetables.

Gaps and opportunities for intervention

Policies and laws

Following the decline of cooperatives, some farmers have negative attitudes towards groups. To overcome such scepticism, there is need for policies and laws that give members to be in control of their organization and protect them from exploitation. RELMA was successful at the grassroots, but phased out before proper linkages were

established to higher levels. In addition, the frameworks to up/out scaling of the farmers group extension concept was not developed

Production and market linkages

It is critical to identify markets and strengthen links to services for farmers before starting production. Farmers were trained to link their production to markets, but these were mostly local markets, except for bananas and milk. There is still need for timely market information for farmers and the traders to effectively link producers to local, national and regional markets. In addition, to expand the farmer-market linkages, governments should accelerate development of the private sector and encourage contract farming as well as value-addition.

Development and dissemination of extension materials

Some extension service providers fail to promote the concept of sustainable farmers' organization partly because they do not understand it. There is therefore a big need for information and extension materials to improve their knowledge. Also needed is information on various technologies and management to help service providers upgrade their knowledge and skills.

For a start, Governments could reproduce some of the materials developed by RELMA and disseminate them to extension providers and policy makers. However, there should be a long-term plan to review the materials and develop new ones relevant to local situations.

Promotion of a savings culture

Savings have been identified as one of the factors that strengthen FOs. Savings provide a source of affordable credit where commercial lenders are not keen to lend money for agriculture despite its being the mainstay of the East African economies (Abaru et al 2006). Even in the few instances when agricultural enterprises qualify for loans, interest rates are too high for small-scale farmers.

The experience in Mbarara shows that it is possible for farmers to develop effective savings schemes. However, for saving schemes to run efficiently, there is need to train

farmers' organizations in microfinance and for governments to ensure laws and regulations favour the establishment of village banks.

Emerging challenges and next steps

The experiences of RELMA and ULAMP have demonstrated that the FO when well-organized can contribute to rural development and poverty reduction. The fact that the new national agricultural advisory services have adopted the common interest group model is evidence of the model's potential to improve lives in rural areas.

There are, however, challenges in making farmers' organizations sustainable and full partners in the development. Some of these challenges are:

- How can the success story of working with FOs at the grassroots and district levels be strengthened and be replicated nationally?
- How can strong FOs be further empowered through up-scaling into broader national farmer organizations or federations in ways that discourage the elite and politician dominations?
- What type of organizational structures could support economically viable and independent groups at the grassroots and middle-level groups to join those at a higher level?
- What policies can build the confidence of FOs to join national level and federation without losing the group-level strengths of inclusion?
- How can the business-focus of FOs be sustained and scaled-up?

To address the above challenges, we recommend the following:

- **Law reform:** Governments revise laws on farmers' organizations, especially those on cooperatives, to favour the development of a vibrant system of genuine farmers' organizations.
- **Scaling up:** Governments continue up-scaling the RELMA/ULAMP experience to increase the number of strong grassroots groups and associations. This would form a strong base for emerging FO structures.

- ***Study missing link:*** Donors commission a study on the ‘missing link’ between IGA and national/apex organizations. Findings could inform consultations to find solutions.
- ***Forums to seek solutions:*** Findings of the study could be used by donors, development partners and the private sector, including farmers organizations, to initiate a number of forums or think tanks to find solutions to the ‘missing link’. This would facilitate linkages between inter-group associations and higher level organizations, i.e. national or apex farmers organizations linkage.

Conclusion

The RELMA experience in working in different countries strengthens the argument that promoting genuine farmers’ organization is a process that cannot be hurried. It further brings out the challenges of up-scaling issues of collective action across different social-cultural and political set-ups

The RELMA and ULAMP experiences show that it is possible to promote and strengthen farmers’ organizations that are authentic right from the grassroots. The ideal FOs are those that represent farmers’ interests and have emerged as a result of their own needs – not imposed by external forces. However, external catalyst can play a big role in developing such organizations and widening their perspectives.

The experiences show that strong CIG, determine the growth and strength of FO at Meso and Macro levels. If the CIGs are weak then self-sustainability of the IGA or national FO becomes questionable.

Strong FO are effective partners in development and can become useful channels of communication between farmers, extension services and research. In addition, FOs can demand relevant technologies and high quality agricultural services.

The RELMA/ULAMP experience further shows that authentic FOs can create formidable social capital. They encourage savings and increase farmers’ incomes.

Finally, for the farmers’ Organizations to be effective there is need for supportive policies that encourage the mushrooming of organizations with farmers in charge.

Appendix: Impressions from the field

Tukwatamise CIG, Bukiro, Sub-County, Nyarubango Parish.

Number of members: 15 (7 female)

Tukwatamise CIG was initially a social group. In October 2002, ULAMP started transforming the group into a business-like organization. Through ULAMP support, it has been able to take up banana production and improve land management by practising runoff harvesting and techniques such as mulching, use of legumes to enhance soil fertility, and plant population planning.

The group is also involved in beekeeping, with its 14 collectively owned beehives producing about 30 litres of honey a year. Other activities include goat rearing and improved dairy production (13 members have dairy cows). All members have backyard vegetable gardens, improved kitchens with fuel-saving stoves and practise better domestic hygiene after building latrines.

Tukwatamise CIG belongs to an Inter-Group Association at the Parish level. To join the association, the group paid a US\$5,000 registration fee and US\$1,000 per members for stationery.

Bananas grown by group members are sold through an Inter Group Association (IGA) at the parish level. Members have no problem with the 10% commission charged on sales as the collective marketing enables them to get better prices, about US\$5,000 (USD2.70) a bunch.

Each member contributes US\$10,000 (USD 5.50) a month to a savings and credit scheme. One half goes to a monthly merry-go-round and the other to the savings and credit scheme.

The money raised from the sale of banana is used to buy young goats (at about US\$30,000 or USD 16.50 each), which are fattened and sold at double the price after six months. Income from the livestock trade is given out as loans to member at an interest rate of 10% a month. The repayment rate is high, at 99%.

Money from sale of honey is also ploughed back into the credit scheme. For instance, the last harvest of 30 litres earned USh60,000 (USD 33).

Besides its own savings scheme, the group also saves USh10,000 a month with the IGA.

To improve production, the CIG plans to start a scheme for supply to supply inputs to members.

Following the exit of ULAMP, the group is now getting support from the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS).

Leaders say many farmers want to join the group after seeing the benefits to members. However, members feel that admitting new members would make the group too large and difficult to manage. Instead, they advise applicants to seek help from community based advisors and form their own groups.

The advisors, two or three from each group, were specially trained by ULAMP on technical matters and how to help form new groups. To reach out to more farmers, they have formed an association of their own at the sub-county level. The Bukiro Farmers' Trainers Association provides training to new and existing CIGS on request. They are not paid, but are given meals and reimbursed transport costs. BUFATA members have a saving and credit scheme of their own.

Like Tukwatamise, new groups have to meet a set of conditions to join the IGA. These include a proper group constitution known to all members, well kept record on business and meetings, produce that can be collectively marketed, and a well functioning savings and credit scheme. In addition, they must pay the registration fee and contribute to meeting the costs of IGA operation, and be willing to join its savings and credit scheme.

Members of Tukwatamise understand the role of their IGA, which they identified as an apex organization of the CIGS at the Parish level. Asked about its functions, they cited the following:

- It serves as an advocate by voicing the interest of the CIGs at the parish and sub-county administration and influencing development priorities.

- It serves as a marketing agent by identifying buyers, enabling bulk delivery and bargaining for better prices.
- It promotes commercial farming by providing information on marketable crops.
- It provides as a saving and credit service for member CIGs.
- It provides facilitates networking with the media and other institutions.
- It organizes regular exchange visits among CIGs.

Members said CIGs influence the local administration and that some of the administrators are members of the groups. They also reported that ULAMP training on leadership had helped officials govern CIGs well. Such leaders listen to members' views and are able to mobilize local resources for the group's benefit.

Members also reported that because of the organizational discipline cultivated by the CIGs system, people especially women, have learnt the importance of attending meetings and participate more actively in public discussions. As a result, the community has a bigger say in development matters.

On politics, CIGs were seen as influential at mainly in parishes and, to a lesser extent at sub-county level. Members gave the example of the last elections. In areas where ULAMP operated, most of the Local Council One (LC1) leaders at village or cell level, and LC2 (parish level) were either members of CIGs or supported by the groups..

Regarding social impact, the members stated that the CIGs do not only operate exclusively on economic issues. They also serve as self-help organizations and address issues such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence and other social problems. Although alcohol consumption has increased due to higher incomes from organized marketing, drinking has declined among CIG members due to peer pressure and the need to focus on production and savings.

The impact of the CIG, coupled with progressive government regulation, has almost controlled domestic violence. The homestead improvement scheme has helped

introduce hygiene, better nutrition from backyard gardening and the use of improved household utensils.

Most members reported that they have more than doubled banana yields and substantially increased their incomes. As a result, they are also contributing more in graduated tax and sales tax.

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United Nations Avenue, Gigiri - PO Box 30677 - 00100 Nairobi, Kenya
Tel: +254 20 7224000 or via USA +1 650 833 6645
Fax: +254 20 7224001 or via USA +1 650 833 6646
www.worldagroforestry.org