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LIVELIHOOD IMPROVEMENT THROUGH MARKET-ORIENTED FARMING



Interview of Ismaïla Jarjou (Concern Universal)

Ismaïla Jarjou is the program coordinator of the NGO Concern Universal for the Gambia. He also manages a project in Upper river region, led in partnership with WASDA, an organization representing more than 94 villages or *kafos*.

Their aim is to help the farmers to grow enough food and earn a decent living. Their actions include: improving horticultural, livestock and agro-forestry practices; providing access to potable water; encouraging access to new markets; promoting micro gardening; and nurturing new initiatives - such as reduced firewood use through improved fuel efficient stoves.

About a project led by:



www.concern-universal.org

WASDA

Wuli and Sandu Development Agency

What kind of marketing strategies trained farmers have implemented?

Marketing strategies are developed with local partners at community level. Before the project, farmers used to grow the same crop in their respective vegetable garden and this was a problem when it comes to marketing their surplus. At the training center, we encourage women farmers to diversify and to split themselves into "self-selecting groups", based on whom they trust to do business with. Instead of all growing the same crop, there are growing different crops. One will grow onions, the other will grow lettuce ... This has enhanced marketing among themselves, this is working very well. This system improves their capacity to earn market shares but also pest control: when farmers started to diversify their crops, it resolves most of the pest incidents too. All the trained farmers are following this scheme.

Also the impact study that was run last year showed that this system lead to a 30 to 45 % price increase. This price increase is not only due to compartmentalize crops production but also training them on cooperative concept. When farmers are all scattered, they are not in position to bargain because traders go to individuals and can sideline a farmer. If farmers form cooperative groups,

they can do cooperative bargaining. Buyers negotiate with the group and come to a collective agreement. We have gathered 30 small cooperatives so far. At first when we arrived, there were no cooperative at all.



A group of women farmers being trained on how to manage their group and cooperative
© Concern Universal

Links between markets and farmer cooperatives have thus been improved?

This is was part of the training: market and consumption. The trainees learn to do market analysis. They look at different crops throughout the year in order to highlight the most profitable crop at a particular time of the year. They do crops preference ranking: if you grow those crops, they would all be sold successfully. From July to December, onions and cabbage are profitable because they cover my expenses and insure me an income. Another example: during the rainy season, it is profitable to grow dry pepper.

Market oriented farming is important for farmers because they do not consume all of their production: they sell the biggest part.

Which part of the production is sold?

20 % to 30% of women production is consumed at home or by neighbors and 60% to 70% is sold to the market. Farmers are now able to do fair bargaining because they are organized collectively. At farm gate level, middleman buyers come and bargain with cooperative representatives.

The price negotiation is also based on market information farmers collect from central market in Basse. Members of the cooperative committee are in charge of prices and they inform farmers on a routine basis. Farmers know how much the middleman buy from them and how much he will sell their production in Basse [*main town of Upper river region*]. Knowing this information, cooperatives can bargain better price. This works very well to sell the rice. The rice production has significantly increased thanks to irrigation system, this enables communities to reduce annual hungry months.

With irrigation pump system, some of the farmers have started growing two rice crops in a year, and more of them wanted to go for intense rice production meaning 2 or 3 cropping seasons in a

year. This productivity is much higher than rainfall agriculture which is unpredictable due to climate change: the rains can be too heavy, causing flooding, or too little, causing dry spell. Thanks to the irrigation system, farmers can control the situation by using water from the river Gambia to grow dry season rice.



One of the new rice irrigation schemes © Concern Universal

Are their products competitive on Basse market?

When the products, and especially onions, are stored properly they can get a really good price on the market. The rainy season is even more profitable as there are few imported products into the country. Also, recently, the government announces a moratorium on imported horticulture products. But the question is: will the national production meet the national demand?

Local rice is more expensive than imported rice, which generally comes from Thailand or other Asian countries. Most of the people in Gambia want to get local rice, consumers find it nicer and fresher. The price margin is higher in the country than in other places in West Africa.

Do you know if a banning of rice imports for 2016 is still at the agenda?

(laugh) I see it more as a strategy to rush people into rice production. In the Center River Region, the government is supporting rice production, where they develop irrigated rice production through tidal irrigation, but not in the Upper River Region.

Farmers regularly participate in trade fairs, how do they benefit from these events?

First, they got a chance to meet some of the banks and other institutions in Basse for selling agreements. They also manage to provide vegetables to restaurants around Basse. They do not sign formal contract but they make agreement with buyers. Contract farming has worked well in the past and we encourage farmers to go for it but farmers are reluctant because of price fluctuations.

How did you achieve to have 60% female enrolment in your training center?

First, WASDA, CU partner local NGO, gathered together 104 member groups where women represent 80 to 90%. Currently the chair of the executive committee is a woman and 60% of the committee members are women.

Moreover, the center has accommodation facilities and is governed by an agreement on rules and good behaviors. WASDA is doing a really good job in informing and ensuring families that the training center is safe for their daughters or wives. Also, the training center allows husbands to visit and spend some times with their wife. They can see by themselves how safe the environment is. Each trainee has a resident tutor, an elder looking after the trainee so that people gain confidence toward the training center.

Today, we don't face any difficulty to encourage women to go to the training center. After their training, graduated women start their business very well and have independent incomes. That encourages an increasing number of new women to go to the training center.



Short-term farmer training sessions © Concern Universal

Women have officially registered their own land. Did you face any impediment?

Before, there were some difficulties coming from land owners. Traditionally in Gambia, lands belong to families. Usually, we would go and ask the village chief if women could get lands. But families could be against it and deny. Learning from this lesson, we go directly see to the family heads (who control lands) to discuss with them. We made them sign a document to secure the agreement. Once the agreement secured locally, we can go to the next levels (village, districts, region etc.).

At all these levels, an agreement is signed. The head of council used to charge fees for each land donation, but luckily for the farmers, the new head of council agreed to register the women lands for free as a local government contribution. They only had to pay for marking and mapping the land.

Do you know if this process pushes also other women to register land?

20 women now have registered their land and other organizations are doing the same thing around the country. It's important for women to own their land because it gives them confidence to make investment, and it increases also the diversity of their crops. When they own a field, they do not only grow vegetables but also tree crops.



Dasilami women's farmers harvesting eggplants and tomatoes / A women farmer slicing her cabbage produced to be sold in the village market © Concern Universal

How are you tackling the issue of land fertility decline?

Currently the reduction of soil fertility in the rice fields is not a big issue, but when we look into the future, it could be. We are encouraging farmers to enhance soil fertility through application of self-made compost as organic manure in combination with inorganic fertilizer, through incorporation of rice straws into the soil after harvesting their rice crop, and through the use small ruminant faeces as fertilizer to increase the organic content of the soil.

Some farmers started to use organic fertilizer 2 or 3 years ago. And we can definitely see the difference with the other fields in terms of vigor of their rice crop. Those results have encouraged most of farmers to transport their animal faeces on their rice fields.

Is agriculture seen as a more rewarding activity for young people?

Sometimes, when a successful young trained farmer gathers enough money, he chooses to travel to Europe through risky roads like Sahara. He often fails and comes back. I met one of them. Before leaving to Europe he paid back all his loans. But he could not go further than Sahara. He came back to Gambia willing to take a new loan and start over his agricultural activities. It is a difficulty we are facing. Some of the farmers are still attracted to Europe. Maybe 10% try to leave.

The project is trying to encourage young farmer to stay in Gambia because there is a good potential in the area and it is better for them. The impact is huge on the women: most of them traditionally are not engaged into this type of activities but the project gives them the opportunity to have an independent income distinct from their husband and relatives.

Farmers are organized into cooperatives, and through training and mentoring, they are able to make their independent research and action into issues that affect them. For example, negotiating with Local Council authorities to waive cost for land registration for women. They also embark on advocacy actions to make local authorities aware of the issues affecting them.

Are your strategies replicated by other farmers?

Yes, this system is replicated in other regions of the Gambia. And there are other innovations that even the government is following, concerning the rice production for instance. One of our local

partners and some farmers were interviewed on national TV to communicate about the impact of our rice development plan. That is very frequent on national Gambian TV.

But most of the farmers are not doing compartmentalized crops production yet. Our technique is slowly spreading into other farmers' communities.

Interview conducted by C. Bureau (CFSI) in April 2015, published in August 2015.
Photos © Concern Universal



Long term students during a training on agroforestry © Concern Universal

Inquire further into the subject:

- Information, *In Africa, local products return to the market*, 2012
- Study, *Family farmers for sustainable food systems*, 2013
- Study, *Commercialization of agriculture, climate change and land grabbing in Sub-Saharan Africa: a gender perspective*, 2012
- Testimony, *Floriane Thouillot (project manager): supporting the rice sector in Guinea*, 2013
- Study, *West African agriculture and climate change: a comprehensive analysis*, 2013
- Project note, *Vivre dignement de l'agriculture en Gambie*, 2011

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