

Case Study

Problems Facing Small Scale Farmers in Isingiro District, Uganda: Focus on Bananas



Fig 1: A village woman carrying bananas home to prepare a meal.

ACORD Uganda

Project: "From food security to food sovereignty.
Citizens and local authorities towards a new paradigm in Europe to reduce world hunger"

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Context

Uganda is a country endowed with a warm climate, ample fertile land and regular rainfall which provides one of the best environments for agricultural production in sub-Saharan Africa. Some of the most important agricultural production includes tea, coffee, cotton, horticulture, vanilla, fisheries, livestock and livestock products, cereals, root crops, pulses and bananas among others.

The agricultural sector has for several years formed the backbone of Uganda's economy contributing approximately 37% of Gross Domestic product (GDP). The sector remains crucial to the Ugandan economy for household and national food security, income generation, employment creation and foreign exchange earnings among others. Close to 18.8 million or 77% of the Ugandan population depend on agriculture for their livelihoods¹.



Fig 2 - Map of Uganda

Banana Production in Isingiro District

Bananas are a staple food crop for 13 million rural Ugandans who consume 200-300kg/capita/yr². At the same time, it is one of the most expensive food items for urban consumers costing Ushs 10,000-25000 per 40 kg bunch and accounting for 16% of the consumer food basket. However, these prices do not trickle down to the rural farmers.

Isingiro district is one of the new districts in Uganda having come into existence in 2006 through an act of parliament. The district is found in the South Western part of Uganda and borders with Mbarara District in the North West, the Republic of Tanzania in the south, Ntungamo District in the west, Rakai District in the east and Kiruhura District in the north.

According to the latest district statistics, the population of Isingiro district is 380,000. Close to 98% of the population in the district is dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. This is approximately 7,600 households. The district has a deep loamy well drained soil type that supports banana production. And close to 70% of this rural population in Isingiro area entirely dependent on bananas as their sole economic activity. The average size of land under banana production is currently one acre per household compared to 2-5 acres more than 5 years ago. The average banana production per acre per annum is 1,332 bunches and each bunch is approximately 50kg ($50 \times 1332 / 1000 = 66.6$ tones).

Other food crops grown in Isingiro district include sweet potatoes, irish potatoes, beans, maize and cassava. According to the District Production Coordinator, the introduction of 'Prosperity for All (Bonna bagagawale) programme' has seen the district step up community sensitization to encourage people to embrace other crops on a commercial basis to diversify agricultural production and reduce risks related with disease outbreak and prolonged drought.

¹ NARO Banana research 2007

Study Purpose

The study aimed at examining how the policies and regulations in place (or lack thereof) impact on small-scale banana farmers in Isingiro district and share possible solutions with the government, farmers, interested donors and other stakeholders.

Isingiro district is the largest producer of bananas in the whole of Uganda. The statistics at district level show that during the peak season which is from the month of May to July between 75 and 120 lorries are loaded with bananas for sale in other major towns within and outside Uganda. In the months of September through to December between 40 and 50 lorries of bananas leave the district for Kampala everyday (each lorry carrying 350 bunches). The location of Isingiro as a border district presents opportunities for cross border trade with Tanzania and Rwanda.

The study was conducted in such a way that useful information was collected from the banana farmers both male and female. The study looked at how they engage in banana production right from farming, to marketing as well as processing. It explored whether farmers understand the concept of food sovereignty and how they are affected by production, gender and marketing bottlenecks. Most of the farmers interviewed, approximately, 79.7% were subsistence farmers who produce, first and foremost, to satisfy their household food requirements.

Challenges and constraints facing small scale farmers

36 of 141 farmers (25.53%) that participated at community level were able to define and distinguish clearly between food security and food sovereignty. The majority of the farmers recognize that food security is what they have been struggling to attain, through increased production and diversification of food crops. However, they realize that this has not been forthcoming. Though the community did not have a single term for food sovereignty in their local language, they acknowledged all the conditions such as easy access to land, labor, markets, respect of rights and entrepreneurial skills among others. Small-scale farmers who were interviewed acknowledged these as conditions that need to be fulfilled if they are to achieve food sovereignty. They recognize that food sovereignty is more sustainable than just food security.

Of the 75 women respondents interviewed, 40% were concerned about lack of control over land and other resources required for crop production and cited this as a major constraint in attaining both food security and food sovereignty. The men, on the other hand, were concerned about pressure on land due to increasing population, inadequate labor for farming, poor soil fertility and lack of extension services which results into poor yields in the banana plantations. Another concern was poor prices for the bananas and failure by the government to intervene and ensure that farmers benefit from their produce.

The fragmentation/sub-division of land particularly banana plantations amongst sons was cited as another obstacle to food sovereignty. One old man of 80 years had this to say in Runyankore the local language *"Nkaba ndi omwe omu babaire baine orutookye ruhangu omu gombolora ya Ngarama kwonka kunarubaganisize batabani bangye bana nasigaza akacweka kakye akatarikumara nyowe nomukazi wangye kandi obwe abaana tibarit kutureberera"*. If translated this would mean "I used to be among the people with the biggest banana plantation in Ngarama Sub-County. But after sub dividing it among my 4 sons I am just left with a very small piece that cannot support me and my wife and yet the sons cannot provide for us".

Considering the causes of the challenges to attain food sovereignty and hence food security the women attributed this to the fact that women do not own any assets, do not control the proceeds from the bananas, have no money to buy land and they produce many children who present them with a burden of caring for them.

Only 8 of the female farmers and 17 of the male farmers interviewed had received any form of technical support either from government or NGOs. The support received included seeds, farm implements and manure. On the education side, the support included improved farming practices, use of manure and knowledge on poultry rearing. Some of the organizations that extended this kind of support included the government, National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS), Uganda National Farmers Association and ACORD among other NGOs. However there was a concern that the government was not doing enough to ensure that the farmers get the knowledge and skills to enable them improve on their farming practices with a view to increase food production and incomes.

Reduced soil fertility and overcrowding on the land were identified as major obstacles to enhancing production. It was against this background that both male and female farmers were unanimous on the use of manure to increase production.

According to information from Technoserve³, with time the small scale farmer is likely to be wiped out of banana production. This is because banana production at the moment needs a lot of capital input. For instance, the buying of manure (cow dung) and mulching to maintain high production requires a lot of money which the small scale farmers may not be able to raise. Other areas of improvement suggested include soil conservation, improved farming technology, provision of affordable credit services, acquisition of more land and mulching.

Banana being a perishable crop requires a proper mechanism for storage. All the farmers were concerned about lack of technology to store excess bananas so that they can be used during the time of scarcity. This was mentioned as a major post harvest and storage problem. During the dry season in June and July, bananas are in plenty, ripen and are exposed to waste. The traders offer very low prices being aware that farmers have no way out. Yet in the months of November and December bananas are very scarce, the prices are high but farmers have no bananas to sell. In the same months the community experiences scarcity of food.

Farmers require assistance to enable them to dry their bananas using solar driers and to process the bananas into wine and other products. This will increase their incomes and also provide them with enough food. Regarding value addition not much was being done by the community in Isingiro. Most of what was done was for home consumption save for distilling the local gin (Waragi) which is sold beyond the district. The women had become innovative and they were drying the bananas during the dry season and grinding them to get flour. They use the flour to make porridge, cakes, doughnuts and banana meal during times of food scarcity. Other uses include, use of banana leaves to make mats and bags for sale.

Farmers were also informed that adding value to bananas may not be a worthwhile venture. Bananas are watery, and the process of drying them takes a lot of time, even after they have been dried and processed into flour the output per bunch (approx. 2kg from a bunch of 50kg) is not worth the efforts. The price offered for the 2 kg is in most cases half of what would be got from selling the same bunch in its natural form. On the other hand, banana flour when compared to other flour e.g. cassava, millet, sorghum has less starch and therefore inferior in terms of nutritional value. This therefore makes value addition costly and the farmer will continue to get lesser returns from the bananas. Considering that there is overdependency on bananas for both income and food without other alternatives, shrinking landholdings and poverty situation of smallholder banana farmers will continue to worsen.

³ An organization educating farmers on marketing of bananas

Access to Markets

The above situation is worsened by conditional ties put in place by countries where small scale farmers export part of their produce. A group known as Kyeirumba Women's group that had been trained by ACORD in the late 90's on the use of solar driers to dry yellow bananas had run out of business. They were exporting the dried fruits to markets in Europe, in partnership with Fruits of the Nile until groups in the central region of Uganda started producing superior products in relation to the standards set by the importing countries. As such the women could not cope and they had to close shop.

The group members also mentioned that, the Juba market where yellow bananas are exported made the raw materials competitive, expensive and women could no longer break even. However, this could also be related to a liberalized market in Uganda where there are no efforts whatsoever to protect the interest of the small farmers and lack of export policies that favor such small-scale farmers. Some of these conditional ties are embedded in agreements yet to be signed between Uganda (under EAC) and the European Union. A good example is the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) under negotiation.

Most of the traders in Kampala who export bananas to Europe are wealthier than small-scale farmers. The profits from exported bananas are reaped by middlemen who transport the bananas up to Kampala. The unit cost of producing a bunch of bananas is approximately 4000/= ug shillings, therefore to get better profits one should be able to sell at a minimum price over and above 5000/= per bunch. Community members are convinced that with improved knowledge, skills, technology and sure markets they would sell their bananas at good prices and increase their income.

The problems related to or associated with marketing as identified by farmers included; low prices for their produce, high taxes especially for traders who transport bananas to Kampala, high costs of transport, variations in price depending on seasonality, poor road networks, poor quality products, internal competition among farmers and middle men who take half of the profits and leave the farmer with very low prices. At the time of research, a bunch of bananas was costing Ushs 15,000 (approx 7 US dollars) in Kampala whereas in the research area it was Ushs 5,000 (approx 3 US dollars), 3 times lower than the cost price.



Fig 3: Matooke being loaded from Kaberebere trading centre In Isingiro District to be taken to Kampala.

The small-scale farmers were negatively impacted by the import and export policies resulting from trade liberalization. They are mindful about the high taxes levied on imports like farm implements which make them expensive and unaffordable. They are also affected by the high quality standards imposed by the

importing countries. Yet small-scale subsistence farmers lack the technology to add value to their produce to meet the quality standards.

Economic Partnership Agreement (EPAs)

The government of Uganda initialed the EPA in 2009 ahead of East African counterparts. The major driving force was desire to access to the European markets. However analysts argue that Uganda does not have the capacity to surmount the restrictive quality requirements of the EU. The case of the Kyeirumba women's group mentioned above is testimony to this.

This is corroborated by Kenneth Karl's article on the trade website about the impact of EPAs and, how the Lome non-reciprocal system of trade preferences was meant to increase ACP competitiveness, and promote the diversification of those countries' economies through privileged access for the majority of their products to the European market. However, after many years of experience with this system, the results have unfortunately not lived up to the expectations. Only about 10 countries have had the know how to profit from these advantages.

George Omondi reporting for Business Daily (Nairobi 5th Jan 2010) has this to say; "A trade deal struck mid last month seeks to cut duties on bananas from Ecuador, Colombia, Costa Rica, Panama, Honduras and Guatemala in yet another development that could squeeze out the region's bananas from the lucrative EU market just weeks after Angola – another key destination for the region's bananas – also banned the region's exports over wilt disease concerns."

Despite great denial by the EU Official in Nairobi, Omondi maintains that available data indicate that of the 5.4 million tonnes of bananas bought by the EU consumers in 2008, 90 per cent (4.8 million tones, worth €2.9 billion) were imports from outside the bloc with only five EU countries – Cyprus, Portugal, Greece, France, and Spain – supplying the rest. He concludes by saying that, within the World Trade Organization's family, the EU's trade regime has generally been criticized for policies that favor Europe's former colonies.

The signing of the final documents on EPAs will open new doors to big commercial farmers who will produce bananas on a large scale. There are foreign companies acquiring big chunks of land in Central and Western Uganda to do commercial farming, though the government denies this vehemently. If allowed to happen, the small-scale banana farmer will run out of business completely due to saturation of both the foreign and domestic markets by these multinationals. The incomes of the small-scale banana producers will as a result reduce considerably leading to increased hardship and poverty.

Land grabbing – even where there are no related forced evictions - denies land for local communities, destroys livelihoods, reduces the political space for peasant oriented agricultural policies and distorts markets towards increasingly concentrated agribusiness interests and global trade rather than towards sustainable peasant/small-holder production for local and national markets.

The other form of limitation relates to lack of clear policies in Uganda on export of bananas to neighboring countries like Rwanda, Congo and Sudan. This is another handicap that makes the business risky. For instance, the recent opening up of EAC to promote trade has not made any significant change for small scale banana producers. No impact so far with regards to cross border trade in bananas has been visibly noticed.

The traders are not sure about their security and that of their merchandise such that they offer very low prices to the farmers under that pretext. However, once they get to the markets they reap big profits. Farmers have no clear information about where and how to export the bananas. There is no deliberate effort to enlighten the farmers and help them achieve a fair price for their produce.

It is important to note that bananas from Tanzania come freely into Uganda and most often than not, are cheaper than those bananas produced by the Ugandan farmers. In Karagwe district in Tanzania, neighboring Uganda, they are equally banana farmers but mainly at subsistence level. However there are no ready internal markets in Tanzania. During the bumper harvests traders from Uganda cross over to buy at cheaper prices. Hence the traders offer low prices borrowing from their experience in Tanzania. During one data-collection session, farmers strongly recommended that the government should sensitize them on existing policies and also formulate new ones to enhance cross border trade. The East African common market (EACM) may come in handy to solve some of these problems.

Organizational Capacities of bananas producers

On the issue of joining groups and associations both male and female farmers belong to some form of groups. However more men (58.2%) compared to women (42.8%) belonged to groups. Most of the women groups are concerned with digging for each other on a rotational basis and making products like flour, cakes and mats out of the bananas. The male groups on the other hand have a rotational savings group where they borrowed money to improve on production. One mixed group (both male and female) known as Kamubeizi Abamwe Omubyentunguka is engaged in marketing of bananas to avoid the exploitative middle men.

Farmers who belonged to no group/association cited high subscription fees and low incomes as a hindrance. This is because each group/association has financial obligations which members must fulfill. Members (male and female farmers) were of the view that their organizations could be strengthened through:

- ❖ Having more female members since they do most of the agricultural work
- ❖ Sensitization of small scale farmers on the benefits of associations
- ❖ Good legislations by Government so that members are not cheated by unscrupulous group leaders
- ❖ Constant monitoring and mentoring by government and NGO extension staff to ensure efficient and effective management of the groups

The big associations that are available in the area include Uganda National Farmers Association with a district branch in Isingiro. Other Associations are specific, for instance, the Uganda Crane Creameries Association that is dealing with Dairy Farmers.

Most of the farmers subscribe to Savings and Credit Associations and these are handy in giving them loans, though their credit is short term and not favorable to agriculture. The National Farmers Association has on rare occasions tried to improve the farming methods of their members through the district branch. Educational meetings and workshops are requested by the farming community.

Gender Issues

On the issue of marginalization, men raised gender related problems in only 5 areas affecting them whereas the women cited 9 areas of gender marginalization. Top on the women's list of gender problems was lack of control over land and proceeds from the bananas yet they are the ones who take care of the plantations. Women farmers are unable to take decisions on how to utilize the land and the proceeds obtained from the bananas. Domestic violence was also cited by women as a gender problem affecting them. The gender differences in this community are so sharp that women have nothing to do with the marketing of the bananas.



Fig 4: A man taking bananas for sale in Mbarara town

One elderly woman had this to say *"Noherera ngu yaza kuguza ebitookye ahasigara omwecura asinzire ataine na kikumi"*, meaning that women only hear that their husbands have gone to sell bananas, only to see them coming back late while drunk and with no money at all.

It was interesting to note that men complained about the overdependence of women on them, not considering the fact that they are denied a source of income. Men attributed most of these problems to cultural connotations where each has a role ascribed by society.

Both the male and female farmers raised the issue of lack of cooperation and coordination between men and women in their homes. This explains the level of marginalization of women. However, if there was dialogue and understanding in the home she would get some concessions from the man. Sensitization on gender issues and joining groups was cited by both men and women as the way forward in tackling the gender problems.

People living with HIV/AIDS (PLHAs) and people with disabilities (PWDs) were another category that faced marginalization in this community. Both men and women who were interviewed said that they are voiceless, neglected, discriminated and stigmatized. In this community there is no deliberate effort to address needs of marginalized people like PLHAs and PWDs. Consequently some had lost hope and stopped engaging in productive activities.

Conclusion

There are many obstacles that hinder small scale farmers from attaining food security and food sovereignty. There is a clear need to address issues of rights, access and use of productive assets, value addition and market access among others. Such initiatives like the Presidential Initiative on Banana Industrial Development should be strengthened to enable the farmers get a ready market and value addition to their products.

The Government should enact laws and implement policies that are favorable to small-scale banana producers and put in place measures to address the adverse effects of trade liberalization (e.g. EPAs) on small-holder farmers. There is a clear role for civil society organizations to step up efforts to advocate for food sovereignty in partnership with the aggrieved communities.