

Mainstreaming Gender in Organic Agriculture

A Means to an End

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The term, “feminisation of agriculture”, is quickly becoming a cliché that refers to the significant role women play in the rural agricultural sector. It is common knowledge that women participate more than men yet they still remain less economically empowered. A lot of the blame has been pointed at development initiatives that do not efficiently identify and address issues concerning rural women.

However in the recent past, mainstreaming gender at all levels in the agricultural sector has gradually been embraced by development agencies in a bid to address gender disparities. The trend is recording some tremendous successes from programs that formulate gender specific approaches that suit women. A fine example of this is the Northern Uganda Organic Shea Project (NUSP).

NUSP was supported by SIDA’s Export Promotion of Organic Products from Africa (EPOPA) program and implemented by AgroEco Louis Bolk Institute Eastern Africa. Being the first and only of its kind in the EPOPA program, it sought to improve the livelihoods of 1,500 households in this war torn region by making the women the entry point.

NUSP was formulated with the idea of generating income through the export marketing of shea nuts and butter. The East African Shea belt stretches through the northern part of Uganda into north western Kenya and parts of eastern Congo. Shea trees grow naturally and take between fifteen to thirty years to mature. When mature, these trees yield an edible green pulpy fruit once a year be-

tween April and July. Inside the fruit is a nut which when pressed produces golden-yellow oil that quickly solidifies into butter but can melt again at body temperature. This shea butter is a favourite amongst the local women as a cooking fat as well as a moisturizer for baby’s skin. However internationally, shea butter is respected as a valuable ingredient in natural cosmetics.



A lady dries shea nuts to ensure good quality, Source: Edith Kunihira

During the twenty-year rebel conflict, multitudes of people in northern Uganda deserted their homes and villages, afraid for their lives. They collected in Internally Displaced People’s (IDP) Camps where, in spite of assured security, life was quite challenging. Not being able to provide for themselves

in their new environment, they largely depended on aid as a means of survival.

In this region, Shea nut collection is an activity traditionally performed by women with the help of children. It was no surprise, therefore, that at the start of the three-year project in 2005, the women together with their husbands enthusiastically welcomed the project.

The nuts collected by the women were either sold directly to a partner exporter or sold to a partner processor who then sold the butter to the exporter. In either case, the ladies received payment immediately. NUSP encouraged the women to uphold family priorities as they began to reap the benefits of organic Shea nut marketing. Motivated by the organic premium price the women ventured into the grassland forests to collect more nuts.

In addition to facilitating the marketing of the shea nuts, the project also provided capacity

building services on organic agriculture in the hope that the women would use the knowledge after peace returned to the area and families resettled in their homes and villages. Due to the circumstances under which the women lived while in the IDP camps, cross cutting issues such as conflict resolution and HIV/AIDS were also handled. This reflects the holistic approach of organic agriculture.

During the final year of the project, a brief study was undertaken to assess the benefits to the women of organic shea nut marketing. At that time, people were resettling in their homes and having to cope with the shift from dependency on aid to a form of independence. The experiences of the women in the project were compared with those women not associated with the project and who market the shea conventionally.

The top two benefits mentioned by the project women were the ability to provide for their children's needs that is, education and healthcare, and to be able to meet household needs such as food and clothing. It was clear that this has given the women more self-confidence and a platform to have decision making power in the home.

In comparison, the non-project ladies, who mainly sold their nuts in the village markets, reported that the shea business only generated petty cash, enabling them to purchase just the basics like salt and cooking oil. For extra income they depended on alternative sources, such as distilling and selling local brew. Often even this was still insufficient to cater to their financial needs, such as school fees and medical bills.

From the information collected, it was clearly evident that

the ladies involved in the organic shea project were better off than their counterparts who traded conventional nuts. However, to end the story at this point would be painting the picture too bright because in spite its benefits, the organic project also presented some challenges.



Ladies weigh nuts ready for sale, Source: Edith Kunihira

The women reported that the work load had increased tremendously, making it burdensome and stressful. The ladies had to go deep into the wild to collect the nuts and then walk back long distances with heavy loads of nuts on their heads. The organic export quality requirements demanded long hours of sorting and grading nuts under the scorching sun. Women are physically the “weaker” sex and such labor-intensive chores tend to wane their strength, causing negative impacts to their health.

Secondly, some of the previously supportive husbands became less supportive when their wives, who would usually “sit quietly in the corner”, began to “stand tall and speak out loud”. Some of the women admitted to having less peace in their homes while others were compelled to abandon the project.

In order to address this problem, in its final year the project tried to involve the men by introducing interesting crops such as cotton, sesame and chilies into the conversion process. This calmed the situation in several homes tremendously.



Some of the NUSP ladies during an EPOPA workshop, Source: Edith Kunihira

In a nutshell, lessons from the NUSP have shown that livelihoods at the household level can be improved by targeting women and designing interventions that suit them. However, caution must be taken to consider the cultural and social set up of the project area lest the changes experienced be for the worse.