

Project Update: May 2012

Baseline survey:

A quick baseline was conducted in seven villages that directly border the community forests of Mount Midigo ranges. Information to arrive at these villages was obtained from key informants such as members of the sub-county natural resource committee, forest extension workers, agricultural extension workers, local council representatives at village level, and some elders.

Key findings:

- There are too many deserving people (a widow registered in every four families, a struggling single mother in every homestead, a big number of frustrated young men returning to join their families from self imposed exiles due rebel abductions).
- Increased practices of charcoal burning and illegal pit sawing in the community forests.
- An emerging trend: majority of the men have taken to tobacco growing as a main cash crop which is rapidly causing deforestation in the area more than any other driver of environmental degradation.

In order to concentrate the project impact, only three villages with the greatest negative impact on the environment were identified to pilot the project

Group formation:

Prior to formation of the pilot Self Help Groups (SHGs), two meetings were held with the target beneficiaries in each village: first, to introduce the rationale of the project; and second, to identify the beneficiaries and jointly, with the help of the agronomist, agree on piloting a project with high yielding and quick growing crop.

Since the number of deserving people was overwhelming, members themselves identified the most deserving and vulnerable in their village to be beneficiaries. This eased tensions among those deserving people who could not become members and could have cried foul on the selection criteria.

Whereas the project primarily focuses on women, meeting attendance had no restrictions to males. And each time men formed more than half of the attendance in all meetings. But because there were more than enough of the widows and toiling mothers whose husbands have abandoned them, men and women with husbands could not easily become beneficiaries.

However, due to overwhelming demand by men to be part of the project, a separate criterion was set for them to become project members. As indicated in the baseline findings, most of the men have resorted to tobacco growing, charcoal burning and illegal pit sawing with even quicker and bigger conservation consequences than the impacts of women's activities on the environment combined. Following bitter accounts and experiences of the tobacco growers who doubled as charcoal burners, up to 20 men were incorporated as members. These men traded off tobacco growing for the onion project that was jointly and unanimously chosen.

Initially, the project targeted 50 beneficiaries but due to overwhelming demand, the number increased to 60 (40 women and 20 men). Group dynamics also changed; instead of forming five groups of 10 members each, the number per group reduced to five and groups increased to 12. This is to ensure effectiveness of members. Members adopted an effective local system of group working (Group Rotation) where group members combine effort to work on each member's field one day every week in a rotation. This cuts down laziness of individual members and enhances supervision. Since there are 5 working days in a week, membership per group cannot exceed five hence standard group size of five.

General agreements by groups:

- Five members per group and 12 groups formed with the guidance of the agronomist, community development officer and the extension workers, groups agreed to pilot onion growing. Each member is to start with 1/8th of an acre giving a combined acreage of about 7 acres of onion plantation.
- For easy hands-on field training, nursery beds are to be in a common location. The project funds to be used to buy seeds and fertilizers for the nurseries while members are to contribute money to buy insecticide sprays at all stages of the crop life

Training:

Apart from the sensitisations that went hand in hand with the village meetings that resulted into formation of groups, a 2 day major training that combined all the groups was organised.

Day 1

Day 1 was used to launch the project and attracted the political and civil leadership of the district and the sub county. In attendance were the District Production Officer (DPO), District Forest Officer (DFO), the sub county Local Council Chairperson, the sub county Senior Chief Administrative Officer, the sub county Community Development Officer (CDO), three agronomists as trainers, the Coordinator District NGO Forum, the sub county Farmers Forum Chairperson, the sub county and parish extension officers and the Local Council chairpersons of the villages. Ample time was given to each of these leaders to talk to the group members. A pledge of support from government projects was made by each of these officers under their docket. The forest officer confirmed his pledge of 10,000 tree seedlings for the group members and pledged more support in subsequent years. The sub county leaders through the CDO pledged immediate support for the group as soon as its registration process is complete. Three sets of application forms for support (Community Development Desk CDD, National Agricultural Advisory Services NAADS, and Northern Uganda Social Action Fund NUSAF phase II) were left by the Chief Administrative Officer for the group to fill and submit for support. The farmer's forum pledged market links for the group. The CDO and the extension workers owned the group and took up the task of registration process of the group as a Community Based Organisation CBO.

They also became honorary members and they too want to join the group in onion production initiative. This encouraged the members more to take up the initiative.

Day 2

With the pledge of support from the leaders of the district and the sub county, the training was attended by over 120 participants both members and non members. The training process was very participatory and members exhibited wide knowledge about their environment and the patterns of rainfall in the area. Some tips from the training:

- Onions require 3 months from nursery to harvest as compared to tobacco which takes up to 9 months of intensive work. There is possibility of growing other crops to ensure food security for the family.
- An acre of onion field when managed well will generate a minimum of UGX 5million (approx. £1,600) and requires an input of about UGX 800, 000 (about £250). Since an acre of the project will be managed by 8 people, the shared costs will be highly reduced. Onion nursery takes 1 month and since June is generally a dry month, members agreed to establish the group nurseries in early June (June 3rd 2012) so that they can be watered by members and transplantation will take place in early July when rains have resumed. It takes 2 months for onions to mature and be ready for harvest around September.
- From the time of nursery laying onwards, on-field training and field experiences will be conducted bi-weekly till marketing

After the training, additional team of 35 people (20 men and 15 women) who could not become beneficiaries picked interest and grouped themselves into 5 groups. They want to replicate everything the project beneficiaries are doing on their own and only need the training from the group. They will till a total of 4 acres of land for onion production. All the 20 men are former tobacco farmers who had bitter experiences with the tobacco company BAT Uganda. Due to climate variability, failures in tobacco yields over the past

4 years have seen their efforts going into waste. Their annual earnings from tobacco dropped to less than 100,000UGX (about £30) yet the tobacco company promptly recovers money for the farm inputs they advance to without sharing loses. The training made these people to change from tobacco growing to the onion project. They confessed that average tobacco farmer fells 10 to 20 mature trees to cure his tobacco at the end of the season. By turning to onion production approximately 600 – 800 mature trees will be saved this year alone by 40 men embracing this project.

In summary

- Baseline survey was conducted.
- 12 groups formed successfully and additional seven voluntary groups formed to emulate the project.
- General training organised for over 120 participants both members and well wishers.
- Onion growing identified as pilot project and nursery beds successfully laid.
- Initial 5000 tree seedlings to be provided by the office of the DFO by August.
- CBO registration under process.

