

Uganda National Farmers' Association: Giving farmers a Voice

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# Farmers' groups and markets

Democracy, privatisation, restructuring, deregulation, decentralization: wave after wave of change has washed over the developing world in the past decade or so. These waves have given people new freedoms and new responsibilities. They have opened political space for rural people to organize themselves freely, often for the first time, and to lobby governments for change. They have freed them from the tyranny of the all-powerful government monopolies that would tell farmers what to plant, supplied all the inputs, instructed farmers what to do and when, and then forced them to sell their whole output at artificially low, “guaranteed” prices.

But with freedom comes responsibility. Farmers must now make new types of decisions, manage businesses, find markets for their produce, handle greater risks.

A new set of organizations is emerging to help them do this: farmers’ groups that do lobbying and training, NGOs, commodity exchanges, and cooperatives that serve farmers rather than the government.

These new organizations are structured in novel ways: bottom-up rather than top-down, or private companies that take over what used to be government functions. And they relate to existing institutions in new ways. Two examples: NGOs are forming networks with universities and government agencies; and farmers’ organizations are beginning to guide research, rather than merely acting as passive recipients of the new technologies put out by the research institutes.

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## Uganda National Farmers' Association: Giving farmers a Voice



Paul Mundy

Take a look at an organizational chart in a typical Ministry of Agriculture. There's the minister at the top, followed by directors, departments, sections and units.

Where are the farmers? If they appear at all, it's likely that they're in a little box, right at the bottom of the chart, with all the arrows pointing down towards them. There are no upward-pointing arrows. The implication: government officials, researchers and extension staff tell farmers what to do – not the other way around. There is no way, through official channels at least, for farmers to tell the ministry what they want.

### Building upward arrows

UNFA (Uganda National Farmers' Association) is trying to change that. This association, representing 90,000 farmers throughout Uganda, lobbies on their behalf, provides them with training and extension services, and keeps them informed through its magazine, *The Farmer's Voice*.

The association itself is structured to ensure that voices from the grassroots are heard. It was established in 1992 as a centralized body with district-level branches. But it found that it was beginning to lose touch with the farmers it was supposed to serve. So in 1997, with Danida's help, it transformed itself into an association of 60 legally independent, district-level organizations. A farm couple must pay an annual membership fee of 1500 Ugandan shillings (about €1) to join one of these local organizations.

Three bodies now govern UNFA. The Farmers' Council, made up of three delegates from each of the member organizations, is the supreme decision-making body. To ensure balanced representation, at least one of the delegates from each organization must be a woman. The council members are not afraid to express their opinions: they frequently reject or revise proposals put forward by UNFA's executive committee and secretariat. The 11-member National Executive Committee is elected by the Farmers' Council and led by a president. It acts as a board of directors to UNFA.

The Apex Secretariat in Kampala helps the committee implement UNFA's programmes. It has 34 staff in all, of whom 13 are in technical and management positions. They work in administration, information services, advisory services, training, gender, marketing, credit and marketing, and accounts.

## The Farmer's Voice

UNFA's quarterly magazine, *The Farmer's Voice*, is an important way of communicating with its members and with policy-makers and other organizations, says Jane Batte, an assistant editor and one of the magazine's two staff.

Each 32-page issue contains three main sections. The first, "News from the Apex", describes activities coordinated by UNFA's headquarters: news of a recent Farmers' Council meeting, for example, or a report of a Danida-sponsored course for 20 Ugandan extension staff in Denmark.

"News from Members" has articles from UNFA member organizations. The cover story of the December 1999 issue, for example, featured a farmer who uses a simple treadle pump to irrigate his 3-acre vegetable garden. In the same issue were articles on a training course in ox-drawn ploughing, an 87-year-old former priest who manages a successful dairy farm, farmers who grow coffee and vanilla, projects started by UNFA member organizations in Iganga and Bushenyi, and several others.

The third section – roughly half the magazine – has technical information. The December 1999 issue, for example, contained recommendations for pig breeding (in response to a reader's letter), information on the economics of raising poultry, ideas for drying fruit and vegetables to preserve them, hints on growing cassava and groundnuts, and a section on rabbit breeding.



The UNFA office in Kampala, Uganda  
(Photo: Paul Mundy)



Cover of the December 1999 issue of *The Farmer's Voice*

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The articles are written by UNFA staff and by a freelance journalist. They ensure wide geographical coverage by selecting a different district to highlight in each issue, then going there to interview people and take photographs.

The magazine encourages readers to make their views known. Farmers also send in articles they have written: if they contribute to *The Farmer's Voice*, they are also contributing to UNFA as a whole, says Jane Batte – though she adds that their articles sometimes need quite a lot of editing.

A selection of readers' letters appears on page 3, and some issues contain a survey form for readers to fill in and return. The editorial board pays a lot of attention to this feedback, says Jane Batte. The letters often contain requests for coverage of specific topics, and the editors do their best to oblige.

## No longer free

Now in its ninth year, *The Farmer's Voice* was launched as a free magazine for UNFA members. Seven thousand copies were printed and sent to committees in every parish in Uganda. That stopped when support from Danida ended in 1998. Since then, UNFA has tried to make the magazine self-supporting.

One source of revenue is from sales. The magazine now has a cover price of 700 shillings (€0.46) per issue. That doesn't cover all the production costs (about 1000 shillings per issue), but at least it is a contribution. Charging for the magazine has a disadvantage: it limits the number of people who want to buy a copy. The print run has gone down from 7000 when it was given away, to 3000 today.

Selling the magazine has another advantage, apart from the money it generates: it forces the editors to produce a magazine that attracts and responds to its readers. "When you find a farmer willing to spend 700 shillings on this magazine, it's an encouragement, because it means they find it useful," says Jane Batte.

## Another revenue stream

Advertising is a second source of income. A Kampala-based manufacturer of plastic water-pipes is a regular advertiser; others have included a gumboot manufacturer, suppliers of equipment such as pumps, grinding mills and coolers, a cotton-ginning company, and a firm seeking growers of chillies for export.

The amount of advertising has been erratic, though. Some issues of the magazine contain several pages – bringing in several thousand euros worth of revenue. Other issues contain very little. The rates charged for advertising have been erratic, too. Jane Batte explains that the

editors could generate a lot of advertising if they visited potential advertisers in person, but that this took too much time. They tried hiring an advertising agency, which recommended raising the rates, but then didn't manage to generate any ads.

### Curing a headache

As with many publications aimed at rural audiences, distribution is a headache. You can't (yet) buy a copy of *The Farmer's Voice* at a newsagent: tracking down the vendors and managing the payments and receipts would be too difficult, says Jane Batte. The magazine is a good public relations tool, so UNFA gives some copies away for free. And some organizations have taken out a subscription.

But most of the print run is sold through UNFA member organizations. District coordinators visit Kampala regularly for meetings or training courses; they pick up a stack of copies at the UNFA office to take home with them. To encourage the local organizations to sell the magazines, they are allowed to keep 200 shillings (€0.13) from the 700 shillings sale price; they must remit the remainder to UNFA.

Who buys *The Farmer's Voice*? Many women farmers, and quite a lot of men too, are illiterate, says Jane Batte; it is mostly men who buy copies. Farmers who act as field-level trainers for UNFA frequently have a copy, as it gives them information they can use in their training work.

### Local newsletters

Several of UNFA's member organizations produce newsletters in their local languages for their members. A typical newsletter consists of three or four mimeographed sheets, stapled in the middle. The member organizations sometimes translate stories from *The Farmer's Voice* to include in their own newsletter. In this way, information reaches more people than the readers of *The Farmer's Voice* alone.

In April 1999, UNFA's information department organized a training course on information management and dissemination for 74 staff of the UNFA member organizations. Only some have so far produced a newsletter, though. There is clearly a long way to go before all 90,000 farmers in the organization have access to regular printed materials.

### Demand-driven training

So what do farmers who join an UNFA organization get for their 1500 shillings membership fee? One of the main benefits is free advice and training. Farmers can ask field-level trainers – neighbours known as "extension link farmers" – for advice on how to solve a particular problem.

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If the link farmer knows the subject well, he or she can provide the advice directly, arrange to teach a short course, or run a demonstration or experiment – to which non-UNFA members are also welcome. If the link farmer does not have the background, he or she can ask the UNFA district coordinator to give a course.

If that isn't possible, and if there is enough demand, the district coordinator can contact the advisory services manager in Kampala, who will arrange for a researcher or other specialist to do the training.

Every July, UNFA organizes an agricultural show at Jinja, in the centre of Uganda. The 1999 show featured over 30 commercial exhibitors, 23 farmers' organizations and 10 government institutions. It attracted more than 80,000 visitors. The show enjoys a high profile: President Museveni toured the 1998 show and gave a bull to the winner of a competition to find the best beef farmer.

## Listening groups

UNFA used to produce its own radio programme, but stopped because it was too expensive and because many farmers complained that the programme was broadcast at the wrong time of day.

A new approach being tried is to encourage farmers to get together in groups to listen to radio programmes on farming and rural issues. After the programme, the listeners discuss what they have heard, write down their comments and send them in to the UNFA office.

The same approach can be used with cassettes produced by UNFA on specific subjects, such as coffee or banana production. Link farmers can borrow the cassettes from the district organization office, play it to the listeners group, and then coordinate feedback to UNFA.

## Lobbying

Another, more indirect way that UNFA serves its members is through its lobbying efforts. Indeed, this was one of the original reasons for forming the association. This is the responsibility of the executive committee. The lobbying effort has brought fruit. One example is the effort to repeal the government's ban on the input of bull semen, imposed because of fears of importing mad-cow disease from Europe. The government partially lifted the ban in late 1999, enabling efforts to improve Uganda's cattle breeds to continue.

Farmers still have much to learn in lobbying, however: they are not yet as effective as the manufacturers' association or the Uganda Commercial Farmers' Association, which represents large-scale farmers who produce for export. But UNFA is potentially a very powerful voice: it represents small-scale farmers – by far the largest number of farmers and a vital part of the Ugandan economy.

## Finance

Finance is probably UNFA's weak point: much of its funding still comes from Danida, and Danish advisors assist the association in its work. If it is to remain a strong representative and partner of farmers in Uganda, UNFA must find ways to wean itself from this over-dependence on outside resources.

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# Farmers' groups and markets

## Farmers' associations: FONGS – organizing Senegal's farmers



Paul Mundy

UNFA's equivalent in Senegal is called FONGS (Fédération des organisations non gouvernementales du Sénégal). Like UNFA (see pp. 123–128), it is an association of farmers' organizations: 29 of them throughout Senegal, with 150,000 members in nearly 3000 village groups. Counting the families of members, FONGS claims to reach some 900,000 rural people, or about 10 percent of Senegal's population. Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of FONGS members are women.

Created in 1976 and based in Thiès, a market town and important communications centre east of Dakar, FONGS has a similar structure to UNFA. A general assembly is held once every three years; the general council meets every six months, the administrative council every two months, and the executive bureau once a month. The organization's managers and other staff are part-time officials, elected by the members. The managers receive no salary; instead, they are paid expenses and an allowance for each day they work. A small team of seven salaried staff handles administration, finance, gender affairs and training. If specialist skills are needed, FONGS hires consultants.

The FONGS managers are themselves practising farmers. For example, Demba Keita, the leader of the communications training team, is a farmer from a forested area in southern Senegal, where he grows mangoes and oranges for sale, and groundnuts, sweet potatoes and cassava for home consumption.

### A refreshing change

Launched in 1996, *Action Paysanne* is the FONGS newspaper. Three thousand copies of this 8-page, French-language paper are printed each quarter, and are distributed throughout Senegal.

*Action Paysanne* has three aims: to inform readers on policies and issues; create exchanges among the various FONGS member groups; and introduce readers to technical innovations.

Informing members about policy issues is important, says Demba Keita, so they can develop opinions about them. That's a refreshing change from the conventional approach of simply informing rural people about decisions made on high. *Action Paysanne* contains analyses and articles on policies and problems, development programmes, government policies, and sources of support for farmers.

*Action Paysanne* is an essential vehicle for exchanges among the organizations that make up FONGS. "It's necessary for the journal to contain information on our members, because if not, the journal won't be interesting for those members," says Demba Keita.

Each of Senegal's 10 regions appoints one person to be responsible for communication. These representatives send in articles about activities in their regions to the FONGS headquarters. Demba Keita and a hired journalist edit the articles; layout and printing is done commercially. The regional representatives sit on the newspaper's management committee, ensuring strong local commitment to the paper.

The regional representatives are also responsible for distributing the paper. The cover price is 200 CFA francs (€0.30); the local organization is allowed to add 50–100 CFA francs to this. The organization can keep the revenue raised to support its own activities. They can also translate articles into their local language (there are seven in Senegal), but they do not often do this, according to Demba Keita, because it is too much effort.

The third main role of *Action Paysanne* is to keep readers abreast of technical innovations. Because many FONGS members are women, subjects such as food processing, nutrition and recipes receive a lot of attention.

**Not just newspapers**

The communication efforts of FONGS do not end with *Action Paysanne*. To foster the skills of local leaders, it produces technical manuals, typically 2 to 10 pages long, on subjects such as organizational management, negotiating, organizational development and information exchange. It also produces 2–4 page technical leaflets on topics such as milk processing, the use of neem as a pesticide, and how to preserve fruits and vegetables.

FONGS also produces videos. By the end of 1999 three had appeared: two on rice cultivation, and one on FONGS member activities. FONGS paid professionals to produce them and a television station to broadcast them.

Training is an important component of FONGS' work. From 1985 to 1990, FONGS ran a programme that trained hundreds of trainers in each of its member organizations in subjects such as cropping, livestock rearing and organizational management. But the trainers were not very effective in training farmers, an evaluation in 1991 found. So FONGS has now shifted to an approach that takes advantage of the different strengths of its member organizations. Through a programme known as PEFA (Programme d'échange de formation et d'appui), a member organization can request training from another member strong in a particular area.



A newsletter produced by a member organization of FONGS

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FONGS members also collaborate closely with government extension technicians; as with UNFA in Uganda, FONGS staff provide facilitation, while the extension agents provide the specialist technical skills needed.

To improve the availability of information throughout the country, FONGS is establishing 11 documentation centres: one in each of the 10 regions, plus a national one. It is also fostering the exchange of information via e-mail, taking advantage of the many computer-equipped telecentres now scattered across Senegal.

## Turning research on its head

FONGS is part of an unusual but promising initiative to restructure agricultural research in Senegal. Normally it is researchers or policy-makers who decide what research should be done on what topics. The researchers do experiments to develop improved technologies, and then inform extension agents, who in turn tell farmers. Sometimes, the researchers may choose to do research on something that has scientific interest but is of little practical value to farmers.

CNCR (Conseil nationale de concertation et de coopération des ruraux), an umbrella organization that includes FONGS and eight other rural associations, is turning this on its head. Instead of the researchers deciding what to do, CNCR sponsors and pays for the research by scientists at the government agricultural research institute, ISRA (Institut sénégalaise de recherches agricoles). This gives FONGS and other farmers' organizations crucial leverage: their control over at least part of the research agenda ensures that their interests and problems are tackled.

This system is reminiscent of research in Europe and North America, where farmers' associations are relatively powerful. In the United States, for example, the Iowa Soybean Promotion Board, a farmers' group, sets aside a certain amount of its members' dues to sponsor research. University researchers submit research proposals to the board for funding.

CNCR is still ironing out the problems in setting up this system, but if it succeeds it promises to be a model for agricultural research in other countries in Africa.

## Sustainable in the long term?

As with UNFA in Uganda, FONGS is heavily dependent on outside assistance. It generates about 20–25 million CFA francs (€30–40,000) each year from internal resources such as membership fees. But most of the funding comes from a consortium of European NGOs led by SOS Faim.

If FONGS is to be truly independent and sustainable, it must gradually reduce its dependence on these outside sources. It can do this by generating fees from services such as training, and by recruiting more members. But long-term financial independence can come only if its members get wealthier. That, it is to be hoped, will happen at least partly as a result of FONGS' own efforts to boost their incomes.

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# Farmers' groups and markets

## Improving farmers' management capabilities: Transparent money management



Jacques Sultana

November in southern Mali is cotton-weighing time. Farmers heave bales of white fluff onto the village scales. The secretary calculates the price of the bales and deducts the cost of fertilizer and chemicals the farmer has received in advance.

That is when the arguments begin. Records in the secretary's ledger may not agree with the farmer's own figures. Someone may have noted down fertilizers that were never delivered, or the farmer may have underestimated the amount of chemicals in a consignment.

Throughout southern Mali, village associations manage farmers' cotton production collectively, obtain inputs and credit for them, and sell their output. These associations were created on the initiative of CMDT, the parastatal that manages cotton production in Mali.

Every year, the farmers receive from their association the inputs they need to grow cotton. The only management tool the association has is the ledger where the secretary records the quantities delivered to each farmer, and the notebook in which individual farmers note the same information. Mistakes and conflicts are inevitable.

The association earns money from other sources, too: by bulking up the cotton harvested by the villagers, storing and selling grain, or managing credit. But this income is managed neither effectively nor transparently. The result: misuse and fraud.

Another source of conflict is that farmers may take out loans from the association without knowing their ability to repay. All too often, they are unable to do so.

Poor management of the village associations creates a climate of suspicion, discourages producers' initiatives, and may reduce output.

### Who is to blame?

The blame for this should not all be laid at the door of the association leaders. Rather, the fault lies with the lack of appropriate management tools, and the low levels of literacy that lead to farmers being unable to handle the few tools they do have.

But special rural management centres are now helping to change this state of affairs.

## BOX 12

### “Ina cogo nyena”(You came in time)<sup>1</sup>

This is the name of the rural management centre in Kignan. In 1994, when the centre was set up, cotton output in the village had dropped by more than half. The farmers had not been paid for two years because their association was heavily in debt. Many other associations were in a similar position.

Establishing the management centre enabled the local village associations' accounts to be taken in hand. Cotton production recovered, debts were reduced, and in 1999 output reached a new record of 973 tons. The centre now helps manage 60 of the 100 or so associations in the area. It has invested 5 million CFA francs (about €7600) in building and in equipping its own buildings.

Confidence is restored. From now on, the producers are in charge of managing their own activities and can turn their thoughts to educational, social and medical investments.

1 Based on an article in the rural management centre's newsletter, Ina cogo nyena, No. 1, October 1999.

## Serving village associations

The rural management centres were set up in 1992 at the initiative of a rural savings-and-credit organization (Kafo Jiginew) and CMDT, and with French government support.

The project involved the village associations in all aspects of the centres: design, management, monitoring and funding. This involvement was important: it ensured the centres responded to the farmers' real needs; it helped them become accepted by the villagers; and it increased the chances that they will be sustainable in the long run.

Another important feature of the centres is that they charge a fee for their services. Using a centre is voluntary: each village association must decide by itself whether to apply for the services, and each must fulfil certain criteria to be eligible.

## Simple, transparent, appropriate

The centres offer the associations the services of a management adviser. This specialist helps them set up an accounting system that is adapted to their needs and guarantees transparency. He or she monitors the association's accounts and helps prepare an end-of-year financial statement. This is reported to the annual general meeting of the association's farmer members.

The association's secretaries and accountants also receive training so they carry on this work by themselves. Each management centre serves about 40 village associations, each of which is represented on the centre's board of directors.

Using the centre's services is voluntary. It is subject to two conditions: the association must allow a full audit of its accounts, and it must pay a fee that varies according to the amount of cotton it has sold. CMDT makes the centre's services more attractive by paying associations

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that use a centre's services a bonus for each ton of cotton they produce. The fee goes to pay the management adviser's salary, transport, office supplies and other operating expenses.

## Suspicious at first

At first, the farmers were suspicious. Might the management centre just be another way to control their lives? Some association leaders also resisted the centres: perhaps they were afraid of opening their accounts to outsiders. A public-awareness campaign was implemented, and centres were introduced gradually to overcome these fears.

Greater transparency and improved management have had many important impacts. Mutual suspicion and conflicts have declined, and accounting irregularities have disappeared. The number of bad debts has fallen, and credit is managed better. The associations have a choice of where to invest their money, and they can control their overheads. Their stronger financial situation gives them greater bargaining power. Cotton output has risen, and the farmers are better off.

## National federation

The number of centres continues to rise. By the end of 1999 there were 23 centres serving about 1000 of the 4500 associations in five CMDT districts. The aim is to serve 1900 associations by the end of 2001, and 2500 by 2003.

Several measures are planned to ensure the centres are sustainable. Regional groupings of centres are being formed; each will be backstopped by a regional support-centre. A federation of these regional groupings will plan further centres, maintain links with partner organizations, mobilize outside skills, and establish a monitoring-and-evaluation system. Partner organizations such as CMDT, farmers' organizations, agricultural chambers of commerce, banks and credit institutions will be involved at all stages.

## Communication tools

The centres will improve their communication capabilities to allow them to work together in this way. Better communication tools will also enable them to organize public-awareness campaigns, report on field activities, and give the opportunity to farmers and associations to state their views. The project leaders realized that even if the association staff are well informed about the centres' work, that does not necessarily mean that the message has reached the association members. Plus, adding new centres faster would require a more systematic communication effort.



An issue of *Yeelen*, a local newspaper in the Bambara language

Two main channels were identified, internal and external: a newsletter to serve the various centres' staff and members, and community radio to serve the wider population.

Entitled *Yeelen* ("Light" in Bambara), the newsletter first appeared in October 1999 and is published four times a year. The print run is 3000 copies in Bambara and a few hundred in French. Associations affiliated with the management centres receive free copies. The newsletter is also useful as a public-awareness tool in villages whose associations have not yet signed up for a centre's services.

The newsletter is written mainly by staff of the centres themselves. The first issue described the management centres: how they were created, the main problems encountered, and the early results. Most articles were based on interviews with the centre managers, the advisers and association leaders. One page was reserved for training activities. Issue number two dealt with the new regional support-centres.

The many community radios in Mali's cotton belt are an ideal medium to inform people directly about the centres' work. All the standard broadcasting formats can be used: live public broadcasts, reports on how the centres have improved farmers' outputs and incomes, interviews, discussions, and so on. The interactive nature of community radio will also enable staff to listen to listeners' opinions about the centres. The project management is currently negotiating with several stations in the region for regular coverage of financial management themes (see the story on community radio, "Local information for local people", pp. 21–26).

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Learning and sharing about sustainable agriculture:  
**The PELUM Association**



John Wilson

## Keep the log fire burning

June 1992: winter in Zimbabwe. The air outside was icy, the accommodation simple. The 14 workshop participants took turns to sit near the log fire. The participants, from five countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, were discussing ways to improve the training of NGO staff who work with rural communities in sustainable agriculture.

This was the beginning of the Participatory Ecological Land-Use Management Association – the PELUM Association, for short. Although it now has over 100 member organizations from 10 countries in Eastern and Southern Africa, the association still operates in the same way as when it began. The log fire has kept burning.

## Roots

The group around the log fire were trying to decide what skills, knowledge and attitudes a community facilitator would need to work with rural people in agriculture and natural resource management. In answering this question, they developed a curriculum for training such facilitators.

What had prompted the question? During the 1970s and 80s the standard approach to agricultural development was to teach “modern” farming methods to as many farmers as possible. These methods emphasised the use of purchased seed, fertilizers and pesticides to maximize yields.

That worked reasonably well as long as the inputs were subsidized or free. But then governments began “structural adjustment” policies that eliminated such handouts. Suddenly, many farmers found they could no longer afford the inputs they had come to depend on.

Another problem was that the standard development approach ignored, or denigrated, the knowledge and skills that the farmers already had. Farmers who have for years grown crops and raised livestock in a difficult environment have built up a rich knowledge about the local soils and climate, what works and what doesn't. They have different amounts of land, attitudes towards risk and levels of wealth; they have intricate business relationships, friendships and mutual obligations.

The conventional, top-down approach ignored all this. Extension workers told farmers what to do, and then complained that they did not accept their “advice”.

As the 1980s progressed, more and more development organizations realized this, so changed the way they worked. First, they started using “participatory” approaches, where farmers (rather than the development organization) assess their own needs, and plan changes based on their own knowledge and skills. The role of the development organization is that of facilitator rather than teacher: instead of telling the farmers what to do, it helps them plan and introduces them to new ideas that they can consider. A range of participatory methods was developed to help farmers identify problems, design solutions, and monitor their progress.

Second, the development organizations began promoting sustainable agriculture based on local resources: traditional varieties, compost and manure available nearby, and so forth. This has several advantages: it reduces the amount of inputs that farmers have to buy, and it avoids the health and environmental problems that pesticides and artificial fertilizers may cause.

But there was a shortage of community facilitators who could promote the new farming methods using the participatory techniques. Most extensionists had gone through agricultural colleges, where they had learned input-intensive farming and the old, top-down education methods. So it was necessary both to link together the various new ideas in participation and agriculture, and to train NGO staff how to use them.

Nine months after their first meeting, the same group that had planned the original curriculum met again. The draft had been circulated, discussed and mulled over. It was time to take it another step. The group explored an idea that had emerged at the previous workshop: that it would make sense to do more than just design a curriculum. It was an opportunity to link together the efforts of local NGOs in sustainable agriculture so they could learn from one another.

### Why share?

NGOs work largely in isolation. Their work is intense, and they learn a tremendous amount in carrying it out. Unfortunately, they often share this experience somewhat haphazardly. This became clear to the group as they debated.

They decided to plan an association to link the various NGOs together. A steering committee was chosen, with one person from each country. This committee, aided by a coordination team equivalent to one-and-a-half people, guided the emergence of the PELUM Association.

It took a further two years of careful planning. In October 1995, 30 people from NGOs in the region launched the PELUM Association, with the motto “facilitating learning and networking in participatory ecological land-use management in Eastern and Southern Africa”.

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## Network before you network

The strength and potential of the association lies in its country working-groups, made up of all the members in a country. The chairperson of the group is that country's representative on the PELUM board. Through board meetings, biennial general meetings and the quarterly PELUM bulletin, members learn what is happening elsewhere. Activities differ from country to country. Some countries have been slow to get going: initially it depends on one or two individuals, then the base broadens.

The association has learned that a formal network can work only if information is already being exchanged informally. The process of low-key networking must begin before it makes sense to build a more formal structure and establish a country-level secretariat.

Local NGOs often depend largely on funding from donors. It can be hard to survive, so sharing information with others sometimes does not get the attention it deserves. And young organizations must often work out how to manage themselves before they can focus attention on networking with their peers. That often means that only older, more established organizations have the time to contribute to a network.

## Workshops programme

The PELUM Association's workshops are an important, and much appreciated, part of its networking activities. Every year, the association surveys its members to find out what they want to learn. Based on the findings, it then puts together a programme of workshops for the year. There are four to seven workshops a year, each lasting one to three weeks. The workshops take place in different countries, wherever possible hosted by a member organization. There have, for example, been workshops on participatory monitoring, information management, facilitation skills and the development of training materials, and integrated land-use design.

Participants bring to the workshop their experience on the topic and share it with others. Outside resource people add knowledge and ideas, and the participants can put what they have learned into practice during the workshop itself.

As it is the association that organizes the workshops, they are not just one-off events. They also help build the association itself: stepping-stones towards an ever-more cohesive network. A challenge being addressed is to make follow-up and monitoring more effective.



Participants in a PELUM-organised workshop on soil conservation and land-use planning learning how to use an A-frame, a simple device for marking contours on a slope (Photo: PELUM)

### Broadening the market for information

The PELUM Association also distributes books and other training materials, especially those produced in Eastern and Southern Africa. When it started out, the idea was for the association to produce its own training materials. It quickly became apparent that there was already quite a lot available, and that distribution was the problem.

The longer-term aim is to encourage more people to produce materials to serve the bigger market that PELUM is helping create. For example, someone producing a publication in Uganda on participatory monitoring will be able to see it distributed throughout the region, not just in Uganda.

PELUM's member magazine, *Ground Up*, has grown out of its in-house bulletin. First issued in 1999, *Ground Up* contains articles on sustainable agriculture and publicizes training courses and new books.



An issue of PELUM's member magazine, *Ground Up*

### The PELUM College–Zimbabwe

In November 1995, PELUM Association members in Zimbabwe met to discuss how to use the curriculum. They invited representatives from two universities and from the government's extension-training branch.

"How will any one organization manage to teach this syllabus?" wondered one of the participants out loud. "We could each do parts of it, but none of us could tackle the whole thing."

"That's it!" exclaimed another. "That's exactly it. If we each do a part, the part we know, then we can cover the whole syllabus."

And so the idea of a "college without walls" was born. As with the formation of the association itself, the idea of the college – the idea to work together – was followed up with careful planning and lots of discussion. Training managers from the participating organizations refined the syllabus. Someone visited all the organizations to assess their strengths and to decide who could cover which part of the syllabus. The organizations' directors developed a strategic plan and a constitution for the college. Catering staff met to discuss food and accommodation.

By the time it was launched in August 1997, the PELUM College–Zimbabwe included national NGOs, community-based NGOs, departments from the two universities and the extension-training branch. The first students started on a two-year sandwich programme in 1998. Nearly all came from organizations that make up the college – a pioneering group to help iron out start-up difficulties. The second group started in early 2000.

# Farmers' groups and markets

The students learn agro-ecology, natural resource management, organizational management, and facilitation skills. They do this through the different organizations that are members of the college, so they learn about the organizations at the same time. And they learn in a very practical way: they see how the member deals with community organizing, facilitation or agro-ecology in real life.

Another advantage of this approach is that staff with years of experience in development work are able to share their wisdom with the next generation of development workers. Normally such experience is lost.

It is not only the students who gain, though. A tremendous amount of information has been exchanged amongst the participating organizations. For example, while the college was being established, the members all visited each other, giving them an opportunity to learn about others' work and to give feedback to the host.

The Zimbabwe college has been a pilot programme for the region. Its development has been carefully documented and shared with PELUM members in other countries.

## Seed security

Seeds are the basis for food security. Farmers must have enough seed, of the right kind, at the right time. If they do not, they risk planting too late for the rains, or growing a variety which is susceptible to pests or which no one wants to buy.

One can address seed security at different levels: national, community or household. At the national level, a country must have a sufficient stock of seed to fulfil its needs. But that does not guarantee that the seeds will be available to the farmers who will plant them. So the best general approach is to strengthen seed security at the community and household levels: ensuring that seeds are reproduced and stored locally so there will always be enough, at the right time, for farmers to plant.

The issue of seed security has been of growing concern for PELUM members. In mid-1997 a network of NGOs in the UK asked the PELUM Association to host a seed security programme. The association explained that it was interested but that it would have to develop the programme jointly instead of merely adopting someone else's plan.

This delayed the start, but this did not matter as far as the association was concerned. A needs survey of PELUM members was carried out, and some members did a similar needs assessment with farmers. The findings were fed into a joint planning workshop with the UK network.

During this time the PELUM bulletin carried articles about the programme, and the board discussed it at their meetings. The seed security programme has slowly and cautiously become part of the association's fabric. It is now moving ahead with a training programme and the production of a seed security manual. In 1999 the programme won an award for the way in which it was planned.

## Looking ahead

It is nearly ten years since a handful of people took the first steps that led to the formation of the PELUM Association. Yet it is still a very young organization. It has achieved a fair amount in information exchange. Perhaps more importantly, though, it has gradually strengthened the network so that this exchange of information will get better and better. As this happens, the association will be able to play a greater role in lobbying and advocacy. There is a lot of pressure to move in this direction, especially from donors. The association has resisted such pressure and will only take on this role when it has the base from which to do so.

## The main lessons

In its short history, the PELUM Association has learned a number of lessons – many of them the hard way. Here are some:

- Having a focus, such as a joint programme, is a good way to build the commitment that a network needs;
- Proceeding cautiously makes it possible to involve the membership as much as possible. Of course, at the same time, things must happen, so as to maintain interest. It's a question of balancing the need to keep moving with the longer-term need for a strong association;
- Members need short-term benefits to stimulate and maintain their interest in the network. This is true of both new and old members. PELUM provides such benefits through its workshops, its book distribution and its magazine;
- Networking (i.e., the informal exchange) should happen before a structure is established;
- A secretariat is useful, but must be kept lean. There is always the danger of the secretariat dominating a network. It may be necessary to change staff to ensure this does not happen. In the case of PELUM, when the first coordinator left, his replacement was able to reduce the tendency of the secretariat to play too central a role;
- Good ideas come forward when the time is ripe. It's necessary to create the environment for them to come out. PELUM started out as a curriculum-development process and is now an association.

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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# Farmers' groups and markets

## Modernizing markets: The case of KACE



Paul Mundy

### Adrian Mukhebi's dream

It was 1976, and the young Kenyan student was attending a course on agricultural economics at Kansas State University in the USA. The students were learning about the Chicago Board of Trade, one of the world's main commodity trading centres. They had to "invest" some fictitious money in the market, buy and sell pork bellies – and try to make a profit.

Adrian Mukhebi was fascinated. Every day he scanned the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, decided what, where and how much to buy, and of course, where and when to sell it again. By the end of the course, he had made quite a profit – unfortunately only in hypothetical money.

"This should be possible in Kenya," he thought. But when he got back to his job in the Kenyan Ministry of Agriculture, he realized that it wasn't. Government commodity marketing boards controlled all the prices: they told the farmers what to grow, they bought the produce, they determined the prices they would pay, and they controlled the transport and warehousing. The farmers were getting a bad deal, but there was no way they could legally sell to anyone else – except perhaps at the local market.

### Wait for the lorry

In 1992, things began to change. The government began lifting the restrictions and liberalizing the markets for agricultural produce. It abolished most of the commodity boards, and farmers for the first time had the freedom to bargain for a better price.

But whom could they sell to? The demise of the commodity boards has left a huge gap in the market for commodities. Farmers can still take their produce to the local market, where hundreds of other farmers who have harvested the same thing may also be trying to sell their crops. About their only other option is to wait for a lorry from the local processing plant to come along, load their bags of grain on the back, and take the price that is offered.

### Want to buy some wheat?

Adrian Mukhebi visited Zimbabwe and saw how ZIMACE, a new agricultural commodity exchange there, was working. He came away impressed – and convinced that the time was ripe for such an exchange in Kenya too.

He formally launched KACE, the Kenya Agricultural Commodity Exchange, in 1997. The firm is the only privately run commodity exchange in Eastern Africa that operates a trading floor linking farmers and traders with commodity buyers in the region and in global markets. It also provides exchange participants a source of reliable commodity-market information.



Adrian Mukhebi explaining how KACE's trading board works  
(Photo: Paul Mundy)

For a fee of 500 Kenyan shillings (about €7), someone with a commodity to sell – say, 2000 bags of wheat – can advertise details (quantity, quality, asking price, and so forth) on a large noticeboard at the KACE trading floor, located at the Nairobi International Show Ground at Jamhuri Park. There are also trays where sellers can display samples of the types of produce they have to offer. Buyers can then see what's on offer, and KACE assists the buyer to negotiate a deal. Similarly, someone who wants to buy a commodity can put a bid on the board, where potential sellers can see it.

Buyers and sellers do not have to come to the trading floor to deal on the exchange. They can phone or fax in their offers and bids, and KACE staff will try to match buyers and sellers. They can trade in virtually any agricultural commodity, from maize, wheat, livestock and cashew nuts, to inputs such as seeds and farm chemicals. KACE can also help find forwarding and clearing agents, trucking and transport firms, and firms willing to offer financial credit to help a deal go through.

When the exchange is fully developed, buyers and sellers will trade transparently, with market forces of supply and demand setting prices through an open-outcry system on the trading floor. As it becomes more sophisticated, the exchange will allow forward contracting and futures trading.

The exchange earns money by charging a small percentage of the value of each deal it processes: a maximum of 2 percent for small trades, and less for bigger deals. And there's the fee of 500 shillings to advertise a trade. Early offers were by people who did not really have any commodities to sell; the fee discourages such speculation.

### Growing pains

KACE is still in its infancy: 1999 saw trade worth only 1.5 million shillings (about €20,000). But that was a 50 percent rise on the 1998 figure, and three times the volume in 1997. Adrian Mukhebi is not worried: he knew the first few years would be tough, and similar exchanges in Zambia and Zimbabwe took four or five years before they took off. He forecasts trades of about 5 million shillings (€70,000) in 2000, and hopes to achieve ten times that the year after.

# Farmers' groups and markets

The biggest challenge is in finding reliable sellers of commodities. Unlike Zimbabwe and South Africa, with their many large, commercial farmers, 80 percent of the grain in Kenya is produced by poorly educated smallholders, each of whom grows very small quantities of produce, of different qualities, and at different times. That makes it difficult to bulk up commodities, maintain quality standards, and guarantee quantities.

"You need a lot of patience and trust," says Adrian Mukhebi. "For farmers, it's a totally different way of buying and selling. People are used to the old commodity boards, and to buy and sell to someone who is not there, and to buy and sell a commodity that isn't physically there, needs a lot of education."

## Banding together

KACE's answer is to help the smallholder farmers band together in marketing associations. Together with Germany's Hanns Seidel Foundation, and ACDI/VOCA, a US-based development organization, the exchange is trying to educate farmers how to form such associations and to manage them to increase their bargaining power.

There are problems: cooperatives have a bad name in Kenya because they were imposed from above, by the government, rather than growing from below. Many commodities have no established quality standards. Government data on prices are unreliable. And there are not enough warehouses to store grain.

Even so, farmers who attend KACE's seminars are enthusiastic. Two associations have formed already – in Trans Nzoia and Bungoma districts – and two more in Uasin Gishu and Kiambu districts are in the process of forming. These associations have a potential membership of hundreds of thousands of farmers.

KACE hopes to work with the associations to establish warehouses where produce can be graded, labelled, consolidated into larger amounts, and stored safely. Improved quality and larger quantities will translate into more bargaining power, better markets, and higher prices. KACE is also establishing regional market linkages within Kenya to monitor prices and gather market information.

A big boost may come if the government ends the monopolies of the only two remaining commodity boards, which deal in Kenya's two main export crops, tea and coffee. Both tea and coffee are high-value commodities, easy to store, with a long trade tradition and well-established quality standards.

"Farmers are fighting to break out of the restrictions imposed by the boards," says Adrian Mukhebi. If that happens, KACE could be the place where buyers and sellers of these two commodities meet.

## Trade, not aid

In the 1996–97 crop year, a severe drought in Kenya led to a slump in maize production. At the same time, there was a surplus in neighbouring Ethiopia. In 1998–99, Kenya produced a surplus, while there was famine to the south in Tanzania. A functioning agricultural commodities market could have helped avert these crises, says Adrian Mukhebi. Price signals would have told buyers and sellers about the shortages and surpluses. Grain could have been brought from surplus countries nearby, avoiding the need for food-aid shipments from outside the region.

Adrian Mukhebi is convinced of the benefits to smallholder farmers. “Better markets mean better prices for them,” he says. “Better prices mean more money in their pockets. Right now, farmers have limited choices: they can only access the small market around them. The exchange system helps them access wider markets and better prices.”

“If this works,” he adds, “it is going to add tremendous value to smallholder farm produce – thereby really putting more money into their pockets. We talk of poverty alleviation: you need to put money into their pockets, and here’s an opportunity to do that in a sustainable way.”

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

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