

Initially farmers would grow vegetables for a daily home meal. Today they are making up to sh2m per season from vegetables

# NEW FARM PRACTICES FETCH MILLIONS FOR VEGETABLE FARMERS

## SMALL FARM FOCUS

By Andrew Masinde

Geoffrey Odyek Omara from Oloro village in Lira district earns sh2m per season from vegetable growing on half an acre.

Omara says he has profited from this trade.

"I feed my grandchildren, educate them and provide all their basic needs from this business," he revealed. He has also been able to buy more land using money from the sale of vegetables.

Initially, Omara says he thought commercial farming could only be done on huge chunks of land.

"When I attended training in vegetable growing by Integrated Seed Sector Development (ISSD) Plus in partnership with East-West Seed Knowledge Transfer (EWS-KT), I came to learn that you can earn money even from a small piece of land," he says.

Omara learnt that vegetables can feed the family



### PLANS...

Geoffrey Omara, a farmer, wants to upgrade his house from grass-thatched to an iron-roofed structure



Vegetable farmers in northern Uganda can now boast of such healthy harvests

Priority are high-value vegetables like tomatoes, cucumber, pumpkins, carrots, onions, cabbages & egg plants

and also bring in money if managed well.

Using profits from his produce, Omara plans to renovate his house from grass-thatched to a permanent iron sheet-roofed structure.

"The grass on my house is falling off. I plan to buy corrugated iron sheets. That will improve my lifestyle," he says.

Sam Ogwang, a painter, also testifies to profiting from vegetable growing after attending training and a demonstration in the garden. Before that, he was growing vegetables for daily meals.

"I started visiting vegetable farmers to get more information, which helped me. I rented 1.5 acres of land and started growing tomatoes. I was lucky they turned out well and I earned sh4.6m, having spent about sh1.5m on the project, so my profit was sh3.1m," he testifies.

Ogwang's neighbour has also started growing tomatoes after seeing him harvest money. Ogwang says with the new techniques, farmers are able to grow vegetables during the dry season.

"We have partially dammed the water to ensure year-round supply. During the dry season, we water with cans in the morning and evening. Currently, I am building a house using the money I earned from tomatoes," Ogwang says.

Joyce Among, a farmer in Oloro, a village in Lira district, who was also trained in vegetable growing, testifies that her crops are doing well. Among, who grows tomatoes and cabbage, says she does not need a lot of land to farm and that vegetable growing is not labour intensive.

"My tomato plants are doing well, though the inputs are expensive," she says.



Lira farmers get practical skills from a cabbage demonstration garden

sector. Horticulture production is going on countrywide, with commercial activity mainly in the west and southwestern Uganda. However, the northern region was not traditionally seen as a strong vegetable production area due to the long dry seasons that affect the area.

The highly disruptive armed conflict from 1986-2009, further hindered growth of the agricultural sector in the north. Currently, no vegetable seed company or government agency invests in the vegetable sector structurally in the region.

Most farmers, therefore, depend on their own experience, seeds and inputs provided by agro-input retailers.

To ensure that the northern region starts producing vegetables, ISSD Plus and EWS-KT are training farmers in the field.

Cate Adila, a vegetable manager at ISSD, says they believe that with knowledge on improved production, farmers can benefit more from using improved vegetable varieties adapted to local agronomic and climatic conditions.

Adila explains that alongside better farm practices, improved plant varieties also offer smallholder farmers a greater resilience to

diseases, stress and increased yields. In addition, vegetables with superior post-harvest qualities are better marketable and can lead to increased market demand.

"We set up 600 demonstration sites in Lira and Gulu. It is from there that we started teaching farmers the improved techniques. Twenty-five farmers have been coming to receive training throughout the crop cycle," he says.

Adila explains that during training, they prioritise high-value vegetables, such as tomatoes, cucumber, pumpkins, carrots, onions, cabbage, peppers and eggplants. This is because they are high value, nutritious and someone with a small area can confidently grow enough to take to the market.

"During training, the four priority topics include: raising seedlings and transplanting, fertilization, crop protection and soil moisture conservation techniques. We promote low-cost techniques - just raised beds, irrigating with watering cans, trilling and mulching," he said.

Nancy Achen, the EWS-KT knowledge transfer officer for Lira, says previously, most farmers were growing traditional vegetables like *malakwang* (*Hibiscus* spp). The production of tomatoes, cabbage and other high-value vegetables was low and of poor quality. After the intervention of EWS-KT, farmers are beginning to prioritise vegetables and they are earning money.

"Farmers now feel confident that they can access technical assistance. Through practical training, farmers are able to see the varieties, evaluate them, and are trained on how to grow them," he said.

Among notes that it takes only three months to harvest vegetables, where she earns up to sh2m in a good season.

Uganda has enormous horticulture potential. It has fairly well distributed rainfall and moderate climate that makes it capable of producing most of the tropical and sub-tropical fruits, as well as vegetables, herbs, spices or even temperate fruits in the higher altitude areas.

However, even with the natural conditions in place, the sector is not growing significantly. According to Agrifoodplus 2015, the limiting factors include: poor infrastructure, low productivity and production, poor quality, food safety and traceability issues, as well as counterfeit inputs, especially seeds.

Small-scale rain-fed farms dominate a dispersed sub-

## CHALLENGES FOR FARMERS

1 William Ogwok, an agro-input retailer, says traditionally, people think growing and trading in vegetables is not profitable. He says vegetables are seen as a poor man's staple. "The bulk of the markets only seem to have tomatoes, cabbage, onions and eggplants. Traditional leafy vegetables do not seem to be widely traded," he revealed.

2 He said availability of seeds is still a challenge, hence the need to have enough seeds at the right time. For many farmers, accessing the market is difficult due to lack of good roads and transport means. "This affects farmers as they take their produce to markets or getting agro-inputs, as well as others who may need to travel to their monthly meeting venues," he said.