

SKILLED LOCAL FARMERS TRANSFORM

By Geoffrey Mutegeki

In the village of Akolodong, Lira district, David Ayo is picking tomatoes from a garden. Despite the scorching sun, Ayo welcomes us with a smile.

Aged 56, Ayo grows tomatoes for sale. Currently, he has about an acre ready for harvesting and other acres of about two months old.

"This is money," Ayo says as he shows some of the fruits he has picked.

The father of six says he was introduced to better vegetable growing agronomics a year ago through the Integrated Seed Sector Development (ISSD-Plus) project that aims at contributing to increased earnings and competitiveness of actors in the vegetable sector.

"I had been growing vegetables for a long time, but I was not making money. I would mix varieties and most of the seeds would not germinate. Those that managed to germinate would easily die or bear a few fruits," Ayo says.

Previously, he neither used fertilisers nor spaced his crops. He also used not to utilise the services of extension workers, which affected his productivity.

"I always wanted to produce vegetables and earn money to help me improve my livelihood, but I did not know how to achieve it," he says.

That changed in 2019, when Ayo got training in good agronomic practices. Together with other members of Akolodong Vegetable Group, they learnt how to grow vegetables.

"Through the training, I got to know about tomato varieties such as Anja F1 and others which are not easily attacked by diseases, but are high-yielding, of good quality and easy to market," he says.

IMPROVED YIELDS AND INCOME

Before Ayo got the training, he would earn about sh4m from an acre of tomatoes, but now he gets at least sh10m.

"The market is available in Lira because every family uses tomatoes to cook. Sometimes traders come from Juba (South Sudan) and buy my vegetables. This is helping me earn money," he says.

The development of vegetables is key for improved national food and nutrition security.

Steven Wofode, a farmer from Mutufu village in Mutufu town council, Sironko district, explains that since he decided to concentrate on vegetable growing, his income has improved.

"From one acre, I can get sh8m after investing sh4m to sh5m in tomato growing. This is just in three months. I am enjoying vegetable growing," he says.

In comparison with tomato earnings, Wofode would get sh1.6m



Godfrey Odongo, an nurse from Lira district, in his tomato garden



Gloria Mutoni, an agriculturalist and vegetable brigadier in Lira

PHOTOS BY GEOFFREY MUTEGEKI

The development of vegetables is key for improved national food and nutrition security.

from an acre of maize after investing about sh600,000.

"I have been able to buy three plots of land, a water pump to irrigate my crops and my children are going to school because of these vegetables," he says.

Unlike Ayo, Wafode also grows green pepper and cabbages.

"Many traders from Kenya come here and buy our products. But we need a bigger market since we now have the knowledge," Wafode says.

For a long time, Ugandans have been growing vegetables but mainly on a small-scale and without good agronomic practices, which has led to poor productivity and lack of market.

However, in the last four years, many Ugandan farmers have been introduced to better vegetable growing agronomic practices and skilled by experts from ISSD-Plus.

People like health workers have also got interested in growing



Steven Wofode, a farmer from Mutufu village in Sironko district, displaying his green pepper plant

vegetables. Godfrey Odongo, an enrolled nurse from Akangi village in Lira district, is a new entrant in vegetable growing and has since established an acre of tomatoes.

"I was inspired by the vegetable brigadiers. I have been hearing that it is lucrative to grow vegetables, but I lacked the knowledge on how to do it until I met a vegetable brigadier," Akangi says.

When Akangi bought the seeds, he was guided on how to establish a nursery bed, spraying and plotting the garden.

In Sironko district, Janet Nafuye Buhule, the district agriculture officer, has also ventured into vegetable growing after being trained by ISSD vegetable brigadiers.

"I have been growing other crops such as bananas and rearing animals. I am now into vegetable growing after being equipped with the right knowledge by some of our extension workers who were trained by ISSD," Nafuye says.

Sironko is one of the districts in Uganda where horticulture has been a part of the farming culture.

"ISSD has helped farmers who used to rely on indigenous knowledge to grow vegetables get modern farming skills. They have helped farmers adopt new technology such as high-yielding and disease-resistant vegetable varieties which help farmers earn money," Nafuye says.

Having been trained, Nafuye has also established demonstration gardens on the district land to show farmers how best they can grow vegetables.

"Even when the project ends, the

VEGETABLE GROWING ACROSS UGANDA



Peter Claver Natseba, a vegetable brigadier from Sironko district, in one of the demonstration gardens

vegetable brigadiers and farmers like us will take up the venture. With the right knowledge, the future of vegetable growing is bright," she says.

VEGETABLE BRIGADIERS

In a bid to improve vegetable growers' production skills, ISSD, in collaboration with Wageningen University – Plant Research (PR), designed a training of trainers programme for the extension service providers within the sector (sector professionals).

The training of trainers programme was purposed to improve the hands-on skills of the sector professionals and their extension methodology.

The sector professionals invited to the training of trainers programme included government agricultural officers, agro-input dealers, academia, researchers, private consultants and commercial vegetable producers with at least a bachelor's degree in agriculture or related fields.

The training was offered by trainers from Wageningen University PR.

Under the ISSD-Plus project, 145 sector professionals were trained. These are known as the vegetable brigadiers

In Lira district, Gloria Mutoni, an agriculturalist, has been trained as a vegetable brigadier and is available to train farmers in Acholi and Lango sub-regions.

For the last one year, Mutoni has established demonstration gardens near Ngetta Zonal Agricultural Research Development Institute, where she trains farmers.

"Farmers are interested and that gives me the courage to share with them the knowledge. There are farmers who even facilitate me to go to their fields to train them," Mutoni says.

She reveals that vegetable growing in Lira is now at 95%, with many youth and women taking part. Mutoni has trained about 600 farmers.

"It is a lucrative venture. I call upon farmers to reach me at Ngetta Agricultural Research and Development Institute for any information regarding vegetable growing," Mutoni says.

Martin Abila, an agro-input dealer in Lira city, is also a vegetable brigadier, who in the last three years has reached about 200 farmers.

"Many farmers are not doing the right thing when it comes to vegetable growing. But as vegetable brigadiers, we are available to skill them on how to establish nurseries, apply fertilisers, use pesticides effectively and safely, among others," Abila says.

Peter Claver Natseba, a vegetable brigadier from Sironko district, commended ISSD for equipping the vegetable brigadiers with practical skills, which they are using to transform farming in their

communities.

"After being trained and interacting with different players in the horticulture sector, I have developed links to quality seed suppliers and developed a better understanding of the sector," Natseba says.

Farmers can find Natseba at the district headquarters and get knowledge at no cost. He also has a demonstration garden at Kyambogo village in Bukyabo sub-county, Sironko district.

"I am a trainer of trainers and it is my duty to give knowledge and extension services to all the people that come to me," Natseba says.

The brigadiers offer practical services to farmers.

In Sironko, Natseba works with Isaac Musedde. Whenever called upon, they move in all the sub-counties in Sironko and beyond.

"There is a lot of demand from farmers who are yearning for knowledge. They do not want to invest their money and make losses. We are focal people at the district on all issues related to vegetables and



Janet Nafuye Buhule is a district agricultural officer and beneficiary

IMPORTANCE OF VEGETABLE GROWING

The importance of fruits and vegetables in nutrition and healthy diets is well-recognised. In recent years, consumers have been encouraged to eat more of these products.

In many developing countries like Uganda, fruits and vegetables have become a valuable commodity.

The skills development and farm placement will be critical factors in attracting, retaining and employing young people in the agricultural value chain and food system as well as leveraging future economic opportunities.

According to the ISSD-Plus vegetable manager, Cate Nakatugga Adilu, the vegetable component within the ISSD-Plus project is aimed at contributing to increased earnings and competitiveness of the vegetable sector actors, which will subsequently contribute to improved national food and nutrition security.

"Vegetables are key crops in fighting poverty and attracting youth into farming. They are fast-maturing, thus one quickly recoups the invested money; they are good for intensive cultivation, thus even with a small piece of land one can be a commercial farmer," Nakatugga says.

She explains that the vegetable brigadiers are expected to cause a revolution in the sector.

"I expect them to go out there and do the unimaginable: cause vegetable production where it has not been before and ensure that vegetables grown are nutritious and safe for consumption. They have so far improved extension

service provision, especially by using demonstration sites where people learn by doing," Nakatugga says.

She called on farmers to look for the brigadiers who are spread across the country to get the necessary information.

"Farmers need to understand that growing vegetables successfully requires a lot of knowledge. It requires someone to make the right decisions and the right moment for which they need technical assistance," Nakatugga says.

She notes that the knowledge needed in growing vegetables is much more than in any other crop.

Nakatugga called on the Government to consider developing vegetable production as a key entry point into improving the health of the population.

"They should allocate part of the money earmarked for the health sector to vegetable growing, so that people are able to eat enough vegetables. This will prevent some of the diseases that are taking lots of money to treat," Nakatugga says.

She says the Government should prioritise vegetable growing as one of the areas through which agriculture can be modernised.

Through these activities, knowledge of improved low-cost production techniques, awareness of the available superior vegetable varieties and their performance potential is increased among farmers. This subsequently results in increased use of the superior vegetable varieties and adoption of improved agronomic practices.

are always available at the district," Musedde says.

He explains that at least 230 farmers have been trained on vegetable production within the district.

"We do follow up to ensure farmers are doing the right thing," Musedde says.

In Butubulongo village, Butalanga town council in Nakaseke district, Gaster Tumwine is also doing the same to train farmers on effective low-cost agronomic practices.

"Those who are willing should come and we develop this sector together. To be a successful vegetable grower, you must have the

knowledge," Tumwine says.

He commended ISSD-Plus for providing the training across the country.

"I want to partner with some nearby school and train people from there. Vegetable growing has the capacity to transform our communities if we guide the farmers well," Tumwine says.

In a bid to make the ISSD-Plus project sustainable, the brigadiers have formed the Horticulture Sector Professional Association (HOSPA), which brings together experts in vegetable growing.

This is expected to bridge the extension services gap in the sector.