



The two farmers tend to their rice garden. PHOTO/GEORGE KATONGOLE



Zainabu Chandiru and Swadik Mukulia on their farm in Yumbe. PHOTO/GEORGE KATONGOLE

Teachers who have become model rice farmers

For the teachers who have lost work due to the Covid-19 situation, the project supports them with seeds. The refugees are encouraged to join hands with people in host communities to get access to land.

BY GEORGE KATONGOLE

Among those who were hit the hardest when the country went into an overnight lockdown last March to curb the spread of Covid-19 were teachers. Their work almost instantly ground to a halt and what at first may have seemed like a god-send holiday soon turned into a nightmare as the pandemic began to unfold.

While in urban areas, thanks to digital connectivity, students in no time found a way to resume classes, the rural areas were hit the hardest. Scores of teachers in Yumbe District, home to more than 270,000 refugees at Bidibidi Refugee Settlement, the largest refugee camp in the world, were not only left out of the classroom, but even food. To ensure provision of food, two teachers - Zainabu Chandiru and Swadik Mukulia joined hands and formed Ichara Farmers Group.

Chandiru, a Social Studies (SST) and Mathematics teacher at Mengo Primary School in Yumbe saw it as an opportunity to feed her two children while fellow teacher Mukulia, a South Sudanese refugee, piggybacked on Chandiru's land as a way of supplementing his food ration. The two have been working together since 2018.

"In the settlement, the land one is allocated

is used for growing green vegetables and some maize for home consumption. Food rations are given every two months. The moment you finish the food before the period you will suffer," says Mukulia, who receives 7.5kgs per member for the eight members of his household.

The 32-year-old adds that he has been able to get surplus food for extra income to buy clothes and dietary requirements. Chandiru, 39, has been tilling land since 2012 on a small scale on part of the more than 2000 acres of family-owned land, growing rice and maize.

"I started in order to supplement my income from teaching. I also needed to support my two daughters with school fees in secondary school," says Chandiru, who separated with her husband three years ago following a domestic dispute.

Essential partners

William Asio is the assistant settlement commandant. He is the focal person for environment and livelihood Zone I in Bidibidi settlement.

Zone III, for instance, has 52,000 refugees with 25,000 households, according to Asio.

"To adequately support the families, each partner has to support not less than 100 households. This is managed from a partner mapping system based on the gaps," Asio

says.

Through the refugee and host community programme, refugees are encouraged to work together.

Covid-19 came with a 30 percent reduction in food rations. The rations were announced a week before lockdown measures were put up in Uganda.

"There was an outcry at that time and during the second lockdown essential partners in livelihood were allowed to work with strict observance to Standard Operating Procedures.

The Office of the Prime Minister encourages the Village Savings and Loan Association (VSLA) models for economic empowerment.

In order to fight food insecurity, about 30 partners were invited to work. Special emphasis was put on those organisations providing inputs such as seeds for simsim, groundnuts, tomatoes, cabbages, and leafy vegetables such as okra, sukuma wiki - at group level.

They also demand capacity building by teaching farmers how to make organic pesticides by mixing neem trees and red pepper.

"The emphasis here is on sustainability such that when the project work is done, the beneficiaries can continue," Asio says.

Helping hand

Early this year, the Adventist Relief Agency (Adra) embarked on a 14-month livelihood project codenamed Programme for Education Advocacy and Child Education (PEACE). This is a consortium program with Stromme

Foundation, Adra and YGlobal funded by the Norwegian Embassy in Kampala.

It puts emphasis on inclusive education, livelihood, empowerment and psycho-social support.

Working in groups, members are encouraged to form saving groups and are provided with seeds with emphasis on large-scale production.

Sam Busingye, the project coordinator explains that refugees are supported with small gardens in the settlement but with large gardens they can have food at home and be able to sell the surplus.

"The gardens in the settlement are able to provide vegetables. With food rations cut up to 60 per cent, there needs to be alternative sources of food and income," Busingye explains.

For the teachers who have lost work due to the Covid-19 situation, the project supports them with seeds. The refugees are encouraged to join hands with people in host communities to get access to land.

"Our first priority is to give drought-resistant seeds and promote climate smart farming because of the adverse climatic changes," he adds.

Mukulia got wind of the project while in the camp and talked Chandiru into it. It helped that Chandiru already had access to the land with his two brothers. They formed a seven-man group to broaden the scale of production.

Going big

In May this year, the Adra livelihood office in Yumbe dispatched a tractor that opened 26 acres. Most of the land has been planted with Nerica rice that was also freely given by Adra to the farmers.

The land and inputs was there; all Chandiru and Mukulia had to do was roll up their sleeves and turn the farm into reality.

Chandiru's two daughters supplement casual labourers and the two teachers to plant the rice and weed the already established gardens.

Everyday, Mukulia rides a bicycle a combined distance of 42km from

Yoyo III Village to come to the garden as early as 6:am.

"The workload is big because the land is big and we are few in the group. Adra did the ploughing but other inputs such as gumbots were not provided. There are a lot of scorpions in this place," Mukulia says.

Rice farming is a highly labour intensive activity with making lines at planting very tedious.

"Making lines on a quarter an acre takes about a day for each per-

PESTS

Rice-eating birds chew rice grains, and can cause whitehead or unfilled panicles. They either squeeze the grains during the milky phase, or eat the entire grain once mature. The practice is to traditionally chase them away or use scarecrows.

son. This is followed by sowing the seeds and covering," Mukulia adds.

At the moment, some gardens which are one month old are ready for weeding yet the group is yet to complete planting.

But his biggest worry is the birds. In 2020, he says, the birds destroyed almost nearly all the harvest. We almost cried.

Rice-eating birds chew rice grains, and can cause whitehead or unfilled panicles. They either squeeze the grains during the milky phase, or eat the entire grain once mature.

The practice is to traditionally chase them away or use scarecrows. Lockdown is expected to end soon. With classrooms opening, the two teachers would return to teaching in class.

"It will be a tug of war because we shall be in school while birds will be working on our rice. We cannot leave the work of teaching," he says.

Inspiration

In just three months of its 14 months of implementation, the PEACE project has stirred a thirst for rice farming in Yumbe.

More than 200 active farmers look at the teachers for inspiration on climate smart farming techniques.

Chandiru says the partnership is helpful because they acquire agronomy knowledge which is impacting food production. The group works with other farmers on an adhoc basis upon request.

Chandiru and Mukulia's acts have been emulated by fellow teachers in similar conditions.

"I am glad we have been able to inspire some other people," Chandiru says. "What has pleased me most about the whole story is seeing all this mutual help springing up around the project. This has allowed me to learn new farming methods and marketing," she adds.

Previously, Chandiru had to sell all the harvest by herself in the community market. A cup normally goes for Shs1,000 while a bag is sold at Shs150,000.

Although Chandiru has gained skills through her training on irrigation and pumping water into a field to plant paddy rice, she trains farmers to plant on dry land.

She says the practice of growing rice on dry land was easy and not labour-intensive, and more farmers were willing to grow rice that way.

"If the project continues, we will be able to see some real change," Chandiru adds.

When she started out in 2012, the Yumbe District Local Government sent her to a training workshop in Gulu and later in Arua. From here she was supported with two bulls for tilling.

From modest harvests, she has built a three-roomed house in the trading centre. Her expectations are now sky high.

"We are expecting to harvest 120 bags of 150kg," she says, noting that each member takes their own harvest share to the market.

Busingye explains that the next step is to link the farmers groups to cooperatives which offer reasonable prices.

"We are encouraging farmers to join cooperatives. Later in the project, we shall provide tricycles to help them move the produce to the market easily. Most of them lack transport means and are cheated when buyers come for the produce from the gardens," Busingye adds.

But she notes with concern dwindling harvests since 2016 because of climatic changes.

"Climatic changes are real. At this time last year, we were harvesting yet by August, we are still planting. I don't expect a good harvest under these conditions," she says.



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