



Environment & Development Series **15**

# The Rwenzori Experience

The Farmer Family Learning Group  
Approach to Human and Social Capital  
Building, Environmental Care and  
Food Sovereignty

Mette Vaarst, Jane Nalunga, Thaddeo Tibasiima,  
Aage Dissing and Inge Lis Dissing

**TWN**  
Third World Network

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**Human and Social Capital Building, Environmental**  
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## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

THE aim of this booklet is to share experiences from a project in Western Uganda where farmer families and local communities improved their livelihoods and environments based on common learning and efforts in farmer group interactions. The project took as its starting point the concept of Farmer Field Schools (FFS), which is a concept that can be put into practice in very many ways. The approach described in this booklet is a very flexible one that met with great success, and we started calling the groups 'Farmer Family Learning Groups' (FFLGs) for several reasons. Many times, we were confronted with claims that we did not follow the FFS principles accurately. We involved all participating farmers in the learning process, did not work with demonstration farms or demonstration plots, and we did not focus on one enterprise. In other words, we did not follow the curricula of any FFS manual, and training took place only on request from the group. Secondly, we increasingly saw the importance of involving whole families in the group, in both the activities as well as the discussions and planning, and this became a focus area. Thirdly, we emphasized the active participation and involvement of everyone – which gradually replaced the notion of 'school' with the concept of 'learning'. An FFLG has a continuous life and goes through phases of evolution to become a mature group, which constantly develops by taking up new activities based on the wishes and ambitions of the group members.

The project team – which is also the author team of this booklet – see a Farmer Family Learning Group as a group of households or farmer families which – with the help of a facilitator – get together to support and help each other, maybe market their produce together, solve their common problems together, and which work, develop and learn together. The FFLG approach belongs to the members of each group, and each group will be shaped and formed by their needs, which change with time. We believe that the members' ownership of the group and its approaches and activities is the sole pathway to building sustainable groups. We attempt to enable facilitators to form and facilitate groups and base their work on an identification of what the members want and need.

The project team initiated the process in October 2008 by carrying out an appraisal, and conducted the first facilitator course in May-June 2009. A number of groups in the Rwenzori region in Western Uganda were involved since June 2009, and more came in the following two-year period. The facilitators and groups were formed within the framework of 12 different non-governmental organizations, all members of the Sustainable Agriculture Trainers Network (SATNET). At the end of the first two-year project, the facilitators met and exchanged experiences at a workshop in 2011. Prior to this workshop, the organizations had gone through a process where they discussed which change – among all the changes in the groups – was most significant.<sup>1</sup> Their conclusion was that stronger interrelationships between people from working together were the most important change

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<sup>1</sup> Using a modified 'Most Significant Change' (MSC) method. The groups chose to summarize their stories using some keywords, which they presented together with some examples from the participating families.

which brought many improvements to both families and local communities. Based on these experiences, which are also described in this booklet, the project team initiated a similar process with 37 other member organizations of SATNET in August 2011.

We the author team have learned much about this approach by practising it. The beauty of the approach – like many other empowering group approaches – lies in its strong and clear foundation on values like respect, trust, equality, common learning, building up human and social capital and knowledge which is relevant and meaningful to each participant and learner, as well as probably the most important value: ownership.

We would like to share this experience with you. In this booklet, we present the results from the project through examples and stories from the various FFLGs, and discuss the challenges as well as the changes observed and experienced in the groups. We hope that this can inspire others. As the approach is clearly based on flexibility, we believe that it has to be ‘re-invented’ within each context; it must at all times, however, be based on the principles of ownership, trust, respect, openness, equality, commitment, empathy and common learning.

We write this some two-and-a-half years after the initiation of the project. Over this period, amazing progress and results were achieved very shortly after the groups started taking off and working on their different goals in their different ways. We in the author team worked hard to capture the experiences –those which bring home the power of the approach, as well as those that illustrate the challenges which the farmers and the facilitators faced in relation to forming groups, building up social capital and working together. The Farmer Family Learning



Groups are all about sharing and common learning; we warmly thank everyone who shared their stories and contributed to common learning about the FFLG approach. This is the Rwenzori Experience – we hope that it continues.

*Tell me and I will forget*  
*Show me and I will remember*  
*Involve me and I will understand*  
*Step back and I will act*  
— Chinese proverb

Mette Vaarst  
Jane Nalunga  
Thaddeo Tibasiima  
Aage Dissing  
Inge Lis Dissing

## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 The Farmer Family Learning Group Project

THE Farmer Family Learning Group (FFLG) concept was developed during a project on 'Development of a Farmer Field School Concept for Family Food Security in West Uganda'. It builds on principles of adult education and experiential learning processes (learning from own experience), and the belief that each farmer's field is unique. We see a Farmer Family Learning Group as a group of farmer families or households who, with the help of a facilitator, get together to develop their farms, improve livelihoods and food security in their families, develop and learn together and build up social capital in their local communities. The Farmer Family Learning Group should be organized in a way which best fits the needs of the participants at any given time and place. If it is the participants who choose their approach, they take ownership of their own development and commit themselves to the sense of togetherness in the group.

All farms therefore should be involved in the activities of the group, as opposed to having a demonstration plot or a few demonstration farms. The Farmer Family Learning Group encourages every participating farmer family to gain an insight into their own farming system, identify their opportunities and constraints, and respect each other's priorities and differences.

Each farmer is an expert in his or her own farm and farming practice, and if there is an openness to change and challenges, practices which improve the sustainability and resilience of the system can be developed.

The project partners from the National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU), Sustainable Agriculture Trainers Network (SATNET) and Organic Denmark analyzed the situation together with some of the member organizations of SATNET. It became very clear that farmers had different needs and living conditions, and organizations had different scopes. From this we learned that organizations which work with Farmer Family Learning Groups must also be able to analyze the situation of the farmers with whom they work, and listen to their wishes and form their approach in accordance with this. The project team wished to develop a concept for farmer groups which could fit every farmer's situation under many different conditions, and which would always be guided by the needs and wishes identified and articulated by the farmer group itself. Only the farmers themselves can relevantly guide their own development, with the help of a facilitator who is flexible and can adjust and build the approach in practice together with the group members.

The main focus of this project was improved food security in the communities of West Uganda. We found that organic agriculture, understood as farming practised in accordance with the principles of health, care, ecology and fairness, and the conscious use of agro-ecological methods, is a highly relevant approach for improved food security in this region. The conscious use of agro-ecological methods and practices requires knowledge and skills. Some traditional farming methods are also relevant for organic farming, and knowledge about these methods is therefore also needed. Whenever knowledge is required, it is

relevant to create situations where knowledge can be exchanged, developed and debated. The pool of knowledge and experience in a group of farmers is tremendous, and even when it is exhausted, they can agree to find ways of bringing in new inspiration.

The practices of agro-ecological farming require labour, e.g., for trench-digging, mulching, weeding and compost production. In many Farmer Family Learning Groups, people work together and help each other with these big tasks. Twenty to thirty persons can make a whole banana plantation well maintained in a few hours. This is much more encouraging than working the same amount of hours alone on one's own land. The social aspect of working together in a group contributes to the buildup of social capital in a local community.

We initiated the project with the overall objective of developing a concept for context-based participatory learning in groups of Ugandan organic farmer households which would enable them to improve food security and income generation in a socially responsible manner. We aimed at educating a group of facilitators and establishing a corresponding number of FFLGs consisting of rural household members for local development of organic and agro-ecological agriculture in the Rwenzori region, empowering rural communities to collaborate in a socially responsible way towards complete food security. We imagined that this could constitute a platform for NOGAMU to work with other organizations in other parts of Uganda.

The project turned out to be successful in many groups, and less so for a few. It became clear that the farmer families' ownership of the groups in all respects was a key to success. The farmers built up meaningful knowledge and social capital and took ownership and responsibility for the groups together.

This is why we find it relevant to share our experience in this booklet. While not always easy to initiate, the FFLG approach can be used by everyone with the spirit and enabling environment to form groups and start working.

## 1.2 Agricultural Training and Extension in Uganda

Generally in Uganda, less than 20% of farmers gain access to extension services, and we estimate that the same is the case in the Rwenzori region. Farmer participatory approaches to learning have been claimed to be a priority of the government for many years. In practice, however, many of the organizations involved in this project feel that the potential for common learning in farmer groups has been exploited only to a very small extent, and that there is a general lack of training methods and structures to support those who want to use these approaches. The governmental extension system relies very much on donations of seed, goats and many other farming materials. To receive a donation, the farmers have to register as a farmers' group and those farmers and farmers' groups who are successful (using criteria specified by the extension system officer) have the best chance of receiving. They receive some training in relation to the donation, e.g., a one-day workshop on goat rearing, but this seems to be rarely followed up on.

In this project, it also became quite clear that the National Agricultural Advisory Services (NAADS) implemented its policies in very different ways in the regions. Much of the extension was oriented towards donations or loans given to farmers, and these funds can be connected with more or less training. In some cases, the loans/donations were given to individuals rather than groups. In other cases, loans or donations in the form of livestock were given on the condition that the offspring should be

distributed to others in the farmer group. It was evident that in some cases, the loans/donations were given to the most outspoken farmers with the most authority in the local community, but not necessarily those with the most knowledge or capacity to make good use of the resources. This created a situation where these farmers apparently reaped the quickest gains.

The conscious use of organic farming approaches is very knowledge-intensive and requires consistent knowledge, skills, assessment and planning. It is very empowering for farmers who gradually build up skills and capacities and improve yields and production. The farmers come to serve the food production needs in their communities. However, within the area of education and training in these methods, there is a clear lack of skilled advisors in the Rwenzori region. A number of organizations (e.g., Oxfam, Participatory Ecological Land Use Management (PELUM) and Belgium Technical Cooperation (BTC)) support the capacity building of trainers and farmers. Both NOGAMU and SATNET have explicit aims to build capacity within the field of organic, sustainable farming through participatory methods, research, training, education and extension in Uganda, and also work for improved markets and marketing among others through networking, attempting to meet these aims within the framework of their resources.

### 1.3 The Rwenzori Region and Challenges for Its Farmers

#### *1.3.1 The Rwenzori Region*

The Rwenzori region in Western Uganda comprises seven districts: Kabarole, Kasese, Bundibugyo, Kyenjojo, Ntoroko, Kyegegwa and Kamwenge. The main ethnic groups in the region

are the Batooro, Bakonzo, Bamba, Bakiga, Basongora and Banyabindi, who have lived together in relative harmony and with respect for each other's cultural values and norms.

The major form of agriculture in this area is smallholder subsistence farming. Farmers work hard using simple tools like hand hoes and machetes (*pangas*). A part of the area is predominantly mountainous – some areas are characterized as hilly, whereas others are mountainous with very steep slopes – and farming takes place on sloping hills and in the valleys. The soil is very fertile, with great potential for high production. In Kasese and Kabarole districts and communities within and around the major towns in each district of the region, the farms are generally very small (under 1 hectare). In Kyenjojo and Kamwenge, especially in the villages, farms are generally bigger (1-2½ ha or more), and more scattered and further apart. Common crops are staple family food like banana, cassava, beans, groundnuts, potatoes and millet, as well as fruit and vegetables, and some grown purely as cash crops (e.g., cocoa, cotton, vanilla and coffee). Many farmers have been trained in organic and agro-ecological agricultural practices, e.g., by SATNET. In addition, some farmers have received training in producing cash crops for international markets. However, many farmers seem not to see farming as a business, including the potential for producing food for the local market.

### *1.3.2 Challenges for Farmers in the Rwenzori Region*

Before the initiation of the FFLG project, the team identified challenges by means of focus group interviews and individual interviews with different stakeholders. In the course of the project, farmers in the groups as well as their facilitators refined our understanding of these challenges and how they are perceived and lived in practice.

One big challenge concerns the understanding of organic agriculture as integrated, sustainable farming systems. This understanding is often not fully developed, even among certified and/or trained organic farmers. Many perceive organic farming as entailing production of cash crops for international markets targeting privileged consumers in Europe and the USA. Nevertheless, many studies and practical experience reveal knowledge about how conversion to organic farming in tropical countries increases productivity because the use of agricultural methods such as intercropping, crop rotation and diversified production leads to significant improvement compared to the conventional methods. This understanding clearly had to be strengthened within organizations in this region.

Another challenge is the scarcity of land in some of the areas, e.g., one-half to one acre per farm in the Kasese and Kabarole districts. This means that the potential must be fully realized, and that the soil must be improved to be able to accommodate a sufficient amount of crops in an environmentally sustainable and socially responsible way.

Food security is not complete for most farmers in the area. They do not produce enough food crops to sustain a family's need in terms of home consumption and income generation. When they sell crops, they sell it out of pressure and not out of surplus. Many farmers sell off their seeds for the following season or sell their immature crops because they need money, e.g., for health services or to service a loan. Many farmers seem unaware of the benefits of planning their production to include the growing of food crops for the local and regional markets, since often they do not view the local food crops as potential 'cash crops'. In addition, even families which produce a sufficient amount of staple food need a balanced diet that also includes vegetables, fruit and some animal products.



When farmers sell their immature crops (coffee is sometimes sold at the stage of flowering, for example), it gives rise to a buyer's market. Many issues regarding access to and bargaining at the local markets were raised by farmers who were frustrated about price fluctuations and the fact that most prices seemed to be determined by the buyers. Many farmer families and communities need skills in marketing and planning as well as building up bargaining power.

From the initial identification of challenges within the region, it became obvious that there was a clear gender distribution of responsibilities and work as well as decision-making in the families, which needed to be addressed in order to improve farming. Focus groups and workshop discussions gave clear recommendations that whole families must be involved in the training and discussions of farming development in the area. Often, the family food is produced by the women while the cash crops are the men's responsibility. Even though education of children has high priority, there is a risk that the money is not spent in accordance with the interest of all family members, hindering the family from reaching complete food security. Several examples were given where this was the case.

## CHAPTER TWO

# PROJECT BACKGROUND

### 2.1 Organic Farming: The Use of Agro-ecological Methods

WE define organic farming as the process of producing food and fibre in a way which conserves natural resources and maintains fertile soils, clean water and rich biodiversity naturally. In organic farming, we aim to build up healthy fertile soil which can produce healthy plants which in turn provide food for healthy animals and healthy humans, based on locally available resources and avoiding the use of chemicals and genetically modified organisms. In organic agriculture, agro-ecological farming practices are purposefully employed to attain good health at all levels.

The International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) has formulated four important principles to guide the way an organic farm is organized. The principles have to be put into practice according to the relevant conditions and context. The four principles are:

1. The principle of ecology: Organic agriculture should be based on living ecological systems and cycles, work with them, emulate them and help sustain them.
2. The principle of care: Organic agriculture should be managed in a precautionary and responsible manner to

- protect the health and well-being of current and future generations and the environment.
3. The principle of fairness: Organic agriculture should build on relationships that ensure fairness with regard to the common environment and life opportunities.
  4. The principle of health: Organic agriculture should sustain the health of soil, plant, animal, human and planet as one and indivisible.

A farming system is considered organic not just because no chemicals are used, but only when the non-chemical approach is combined with the conscious use of agro-ecological methods and practices which enrich the whole system and make the land more fertile with time. IFOAM's guiding principles can be used to evaluate whether a farming system is truly organic. An organic farming system does not necessarily have to be certified, but is defined by the way it operates. In some cases it is so expensive to certify a farm that it cannot be afforded by a smallholder farmer family. Nevertheless, a farm can be a good organic farm as long as the organic principles are implemented and good agro-ecological methods are practised.

Organic farming should not be confused with traditional farming. Traditional farming is often based on indigenous knowledge – and much of this knowledge can also be used in organic farming. Organic farming, however, is not the same as traditional farming. In organic farming, the farmer constantly aims to feed the soil and leave the land more fertile for the next generation. This is not necessarily the case in traditional farming. Many traditional farmers, for example, adopt the slash-and-burn system, which is not a good agro-ecological practice. Where there is increased population pressure, this does not work. Farmers have to plan their farming so that they can grow

a lot of food and still keep the land fertile, while managing pests and diseases in a safe and responsible manner.

## 2.2 Identified Needs and Directions for a Farmer Group Project

Based on a common analysis of the challenges and conditions, as explained above, the Rwenzori project team could formulate the following needs to guide the initiative to form farmer groups:

- Whole families must be involved. The work and responsibilities on a farm should be distributed between family members. The children need to be involved because, as the future of farming, they ought to learn and experience what it entails. There now seems to be a worldwide gradual disconnect between the lives of children and youth on one side, and agricultural practice and farming on the other side.
- Building social capital is a main focus of the group formation. An appropriate amount of time must be given for each group to identify their focus and build networks. They should be sufficiently guided in this by the facilitator.
- The facilitators should be educated on how to allow the process of letting the group find their own pathway. The way in which each group will work should be identified in a dialogue between the facilitator and group members.
- The organizations found that sustainability of the groups was more likely to be assured if they worked with their own facilitator, chosen amongst themselves, rather than a facilitator working from an organization, even when locally based. We therefore chose to educate so-called 'external facilitators' within the organizations who, after having received such training, could initiate groups and let each group select a so-called 'internal facilitator'. The latter would then be guided and mentored by the external facilitator'.

The internal facilitator would be a part of the local community and would therefore stay with the group.

- All participating farmer families should be committed to opening up their own farm to the group, and to respectfully helping all their fellow farmer families in the group.

### 2.3 The Course for Facilitators

The facilitators participated initially in an intensive two-week course, followed by a four-day follow-up workshop four months later. In addition, exchange visits, where the facilitators visited each other, were organized during the first half-year. The 25 facilitators were chosen from 12 different member organizations of SATNET in such a way that each member organization was represented by at least two facilitators who could work together in a team and supervise each other. During the first two months of the project, the two were supposed to work closely together. After this, they were expected to gradually stand on their own with their own group, while remaining available for mutual supervision and support.

The course for the facilitators began with an explanation of the concept and approach of this type of farmer group. After this, the organizing team (the composition of which was almost the same as the author team of this booklet) explored, through a card writing method, which issues the participants thought they needed to look into during the following two weeks. Based on the cards written and arranged on a wall by the participants, the organizing team drew up a programme which comprised issues of group dynamics, facilitation and organic farming practices. 'Host teams' of three persons each were formed. Each day of the course was managed by one host team, which would engage in detailed planning in the evening before 'their day', to some extent guided by the organizing team. The planning

considered time management for the day, the focus of the topics chosen initially, engagement of some lecturers if necessary, and planning the work during the day. Normally, at least half of the time every day was filled up with some type of group work where the participants discussed how to make the topics relevant in each other's contexts.

In the two-week facilitator course, the participants had to explore the topics addressed in light of the common goal of enabling themselves to facilitate farmers to improve their lives and the local communities. By doing it in a group, they could help and challenge each other. One major outcome of the course was recognition by the participants of the immense amount of collective knowledge the group possessed. This was one of the most important discoveries because it was precisely what the facilitators should build on in the farmer groups: just as they had become empowered by sharing knowledge and insights, they should also trust that the farmers would become empowered, not only by gaining new knowledge, insights and skills, but also by finding out how much they actually knew amongst themselves and how this knowledge could be used to enrich each other. The methods of working together during the course also to some extent increased mutual understanding and interest between the participants.

## CHAPTER THREE

# THE FARMER FAMILY LEARNING GROUP APPROACH IN PRACTICE

IN this chapter, we present experiences from the Farmer Family Learning Groups as related to us by the facilitators and farmers. We draw on these experiences to discuss the successful developments, the challenges and the failures in the project. In the next chapter, we analyze how the Farmer Family Learning Groups can be understood in relation to ideas of sustainability.

### 3.1 Improved Crop Diversification

One of the initial focus areas of many facilitators and groups was to increase food production for the families and in this way ensure food security to the greatest possible extent.

**Box 1. An example of increased diversification in home gardens, which allows families to have a more balanced diet**

The farmers in Edith's group<sup>1</sup> had very small gardens and little farmland in general. By networking between themselves as well as with other farmers through their facilitator, they rapidly improved their gardens especially in terms of diversification. They included several vegetables among their crops, enabling their families to enjoy a more balanced diet. In addition, they improved their compost-making and focused on utilizing a water trench which was running through their village from a stream. Both of

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<sup>1</sup> The farmer groups are referred to here and in the rest of the text by the names of their respective facilitators.

these initiatives supported increased and diversified vegetable production. Furthermore, the group managed to sell vegetables and staple food crops to cater to big social events in neighbouring villages, as they became known for the good quality and variety of their food crops.

The diversification extended in some cases beyond crops grown to meet the family's own food needs, to cash crops. This is shown in the example below in Box 2, where one group had initially chosen to join forces and focus on a cash crop (maize) which they could market together, but later changed their strategy towards more diversified cash crop production. The group in Box 3 strengthened their common marketing strategy by conducting a market analysis at the local market, and combined this with production of at least two types of cash crops.

**Box 2. An example of establishing diversified cash crop production after an unfortunate experience with a narrow focus on one cash crop**

One of Paul's groups set a goal of jointly marketing cash crops in order to gain more bargaining power than they had previously as individual farmers. They chose to focus on maize in the first year, which proved to be unfortunate as the market prices for maize fell dramatically that year, leaving the farmers with a loss. This led to a decision to diversify the cash crop production and in this way make themselves less vulnerable.

### **3.2 Increased Yields**

Most groups pointed to generally increased yields in their gardens, matooke (plantain) plantations and farmland, in terms of increased total output from a greater diversity of crops including, e.g., vegetables and food crops, as well as in terms of raised yields of individual crops. In addition to this, the increased diversification and more efficient use of the area also raised the



total output from the kitchen gardens and fields, as illustrated in Box 3 below.

**Box 3. An example of a group which experienced increased output from their fields, and introduced a new cash crop which became an additional source of income**

The farmers in Isole's group in the mountainous area of Bundibugyo had relied on coffee as their only cash crop. Quite soon after the initiation of the FFLG, the group started looking at other relevant cash crops to diversify their production. They analyzed the market in the nearest villages and found a potential market for cabbage. Cabbage grows well in this mountainous area, with few pest problems. The group organized itself such that a few members produced the seedlings for everybody. The group expanded from 8 to 19 families (36 members plus the children) quite rapidly. Their initiative was successful, and secured them significant additional income. At the same time, they improved the use of trench-digging and management of the coffee plantation through pruning and stumping, which resulted in a yield increase of 50-100% for the farmers involved. They still market both cabbage and coffee on an individual basis, but are working towards collective marketing for coffee. Isole emphasizes: *'That is a way for the people of Bundibugyo to survive.'*

### **3.3 Adoption of Improved Agricultural Methods**

It is beyond the scope of this booklet to describe in detail the improvements that were achieved in the agricultural methods adopted by the project participants. In general, a variety of methods were applied, such as creation of contour lines, trench-digging, diversified production of vegetables, fruit and staple food, intercropping, use of bio-pesticides, use of high beds and sack mounds, resource management in terms of compost and manure in kitchen gardens, mulching and maintenance of banana and other plantations. Improved stoves (that saved on wood use and led to an improved working environment), latrines

and livestock shelters were also built. Apart from this, individual groups also came up with their own initiatives like collecting and distributing seeds.

The farmer families exchanged and jointly developed much knowledge and experience through networking, mostly within the farmer groups but later also, to some extent, through increased interaction between the groups.

The agricultural methods which were introduced on an increasing number of farms enabled the farmer households to consume a more balanced diet that included home-grown vegetables and fruit. In addition, they improved the soil fertility and the resilience of the farm, in the sense that the soil was covered and topsoil remained on the land because trenches had been dug and rain water properly channelled in *mandalas*<sup>2</sup> in the compounds, and through construction of contour bands. Many farms became more robust in the event of extreme weather, primarily thanks to the uptake and use of good agricultural methods.

One farmer group which had very high ambitions cultivated more land than they could actually utilize properly. In the process, they had cut down a number of trees, which in itself could lead to degradation of the area. Secondly, the land became infested with weeds, leaving the group with a big burden of work later if it wanted to use this plot. This experience pointed to the necessity of a well-adjusted and realistic plan for each group.

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<sup>2</sup> *Mandalas* are high beds structured such that rain water forms a small 'pond' in the middle of the bed which gradually seeps into the well-mulched soil of the bed.

### 3.4 'Growing Our Own Food Instead of Buying'

Improved food security was a major outcome of the mutual learning process in the groups of farmers. Food security improved through more diversified production and increased income generation from the sale of surpluses to the local markets or from growing a specific cash crop which could be sold within the country, in the region or in the international market. However, in some cases, farmers who had a regular income from producing a commercial crop remained vulnerable. One of the facilitators related the story which is quoted in Box 4 below.

**Box 4. A story told by Musana, a facilitator from Bundibugyo close to the Congo border, at the project evaluation workshop in January 2011**

'When we started the Farmer Field School,<sup>3</sup> the people did not know the difference between a trainer and a facilitator. Secondly, they were donor-minded and begging. One of the members, a woman, appreciated the concept of Farmer Field Schools. She told that before, they were working together but not visiting each other's farms. During the FFS approach, the visiting of each other was good. The concept of "seeing is believing" became more practical.<sup>4</sup> Farmers are able to monitor themselves and advise one another. Farmers bring together their ideas in a practical way. The woman said, *"There is a big improvement in my garden since the Farmer Field School."* There is cocoa – maybe when you go you can see also cassava, but ... you cannot go anywhere without seeing cocoa ... Before, we sold cocoa and got the money.

<sup>3</sup> In the project, the groups were initially called 'Farmer Field Schools'. The name 'Farmer Family Learning Groups' was decided upon later, after an evaluation of what had happened in the groups, because it more precisely described the activities of the groups.

<sup>4</sup> This expression came from a song which was introduced by one of the facilitators and used in the project: 'Seeing is believing; when I hear, I forget; when I see, I remember; when I do, I understand. Seeing is believing.'

But with this progress she [the woman] is now able to get her food. How has she benefitted? *“I have now increased the income or my daily earnings because we don’t buy food. I have now improved the house and we now grow food everywhere.”* We can see it when we go there – she has completed her house, and there are animals. There is a challenge, and that is thieves. Before you would find that we were food-insecure, but now that she has the food, you can see the food, and you can see her age: she is weak, and people come and steal her food. Then, another challenge which we saw was that during the period of meetings, because we moved from garden to garden, most of the days when we went to each other’s farms, we forgot to pick the cocoa.’

Musana the facilitator told the story from the perspective of one of the women in the group, because this was the ‘Most Significant Change story’ chosen from the group he facilitated. This story shows the complexity of challenges faced by the groups in this area. When they improve their livelihood, new challenges emerge. This is a major argument for working in groups, as the members can address the challenges together. It is furthermore important to note that the farmers here came to realize that solely focusing on cocoa as a cash crop could lead to food insecurity in some periods, despite the good market and continued good harvests. This was because they would be relying only on a single source of income. The additional effort to produce food crops and vegetables in the group improved the food security and food sovereignty in terms of control over their own food.

### 3.5 Local Seed Production

Another aspect of improving livelihoods in terms of self-sufficiency and increased independence from fluctuating market prices is the issue of seed production. The preservation of seed also meets the challenges of decreased biodiversity (disappearance of crop varieties which are suited to the local

conditions in this area). Box 5 below gives an example of this activity which was initiated in one group, among others. Many groups started producing tree or plant seedlings, which benefitted the group members as well as the whole local community, who acquired or bought them from the group.

**Box 5. An example of seed production, preservation and storage led by the elderly**

Douglas's group consisted mainly of elderly people. They told us that many of the young people had been more attracted to town life, as happens in so many places in Uganda. Some of the children had, however, been encouraged by the work which went on in the group. One type of knowledge which existed in this group, and which they started to cultivate and interact with others about, was seed conservation and exchange with other groups. This knowledge existed among some of the elderly people, and they had not really valued it, as the tradition was gradually fading away. The discussions in the group made them think about why they now always bought seeds, and also see the relevance of preserving seeds from indigenous varieties which were almost lost. They subsequently made a great effort to select the good seeds and store them properly so that they could not be attacked by insects. So far, this has only been undertaken on a small scale and they have not always succeeded in keeping the insects away – but they are encouraged to continue.

In the example given in Box 5, producing their own seed enabled the group to become more independent and to maintain local varieties. The experience also highlights how the elders may possess valuable knowledge which can be used by the local community. This adds to the buildup of social capital and human resources, as will be discussed later.

### 3.6 Herbal Remedies for Plants, Animals and Humans

Another new activity in many of the farmer groups revolved around herbal remedies. In some groups (such as Astaluz's group whose experience is presented in Box 10 below) the increased use of herbal remedies was initiated on the basis of knowledge among the elderly, women in particular. In other groups, some herbs were grown and shared for use as bio-pesticides and human medicine (as tea). Many families grew one or more medicinal plants in their garden, and became increasingly aware of the potential of using marigold and other plants for crop protection.

**Box 6. An example of a group whose facilitator was deeply engaged in production of herbs and herbal remedies. In addition to this, the success of the group seemed to be related to the general improvement of all farms through the involvement and empowerment of all family members**

Frank facilitated the formation of a relatively small group of nine farmer families who cultivated very different mixes of crops and livestock. One speciality taken up by this facilitator was the growing of herbal plants to improve human health. His family also processed the herbs, e.g., made extracts and dried products for sale. All family members, including the children, joined in the work in the group. At one of the monitoring meetings, one of the children, who was just 11 years old, showed the visitors from the organizations around at all the farms, and she was obviously very well informed and knowledgeable on all the farming practices. This particular FFLG came to the notice of the local authorities quite early on in the project and was launched as a so-called demonstration project acknowledged by the authorities (Local Council 3 (LC3) and Local Council 5 (LC5)). It was also promoted as a site for other farmer groups in the area to learn about possible farm improvements.

### 3.7 Improving the Local Environment

At the initiation of this project, many villages appeared to be in a sorry state; for instance, non-degradable waste, including hazardous waste (e.g., used batteries), was thrown on the roads and in people's gardens. Many farmer groups started to collect this and properly dispose of it. Some groups set themselves certain goals in this regard, like the one in the example below in Box 7, where all participating families built latrines and installed water outside in their homesteads. Having just a number of families construct latrines initially was enough to raise the village's hygiene levels, which further improved as an increasing number of families were inspired to take similar initiatives.

**Box 7. Alex's group improved the environment through tree-planting and enhanced hygiene levels in the participating households. This benefitted the whole village**

Alex's group had set three goals: 1) all children should attend school, 2) every household should have latrines and water for hand washing outside, and 3) improved agro-forestry practices should be adopted, that is, planting of trees and organizing of gardens with trees. In the course of the project, one of the male group members fell sick and eventually died. During this period, the whole group stepped in to take care of his family's land and help them in other ways. Another group member was an elderly widow, and they also managed her matooke plantation for her. We asked how she then contributed to the group herself. The chairman of the group<sup>5</sup> responded that she helped out with her

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<sup>5</sup> Most of the groups elected a chairman, a secretary and a treasurer from among their members.

knowledge and by looking after other members' babies while they were out at work. A third group member had a cow, the only one in the group. He collected dung and made liquid manure for the whole group, which they could collect in buckets and apply on the plants in their kitchen gardens.

In addition to the improved environment, Alex's group offers an example of how a group can be organized with different roles and responsibilities for each member. The members can then benefit from each other's contributions. This requires an explicit acceptance and appreciation of the existing skills within the group, as will be further elaborated in section 3.11.

Some groups faced major challenges and contradictions when attempting to improve the environment, depending on the context. For example, the members of Paul's groups lived in areas surrounded by forests. The groups had established collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) aimed at protecting the forest, including through tree-planting. At the same time, however, the farmers had to deal with major challenges posed by monkeys, which destroyed and ate their crops. They had to then resort to cutting down the trees on their own land and various other methods to keep the monkeys away.

### **3.8 Savings and Credit Schemes**

At the initiation of this project, some participating farmers had already established savings and credit schemes, and by the end of the two-year project, all groups had established such schemes in some form or another. This helped them to invest in improvements on individual, family and group levels. The structure and rules of the schemes varied between groups; for



example, some groups had an emergency fund which members could draw upon without paying any interest.

### 3.9 Income Generation Activities in the Groups

Besides the savings and credit schemes, some groups conducted other activities to raise funds. One example is given below in Box 8, where members of one group joined forces to provide labour to other farms. It was the only group which raised funds in this way. Some other groups sold plant or tree seedlings or other products, and many groups planted common crops for the market, such as herbs, vanilla, cassava and onions, and started selling them within the project period. One group staged theatre and singing performances in local communities to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS, and in this way raised funds. In addition, they made handicraft products like baskets and mats, which benefitted each individual as well as the group.

#### **Box 8. An example of a group which decided to hire out their labour to raise funds**

Rwamahe's group consisted of 23 member families who lived close to the town of Fort Portal. Their farms were relatively big, ranging from 4-10 acres in size. At one of their first meetings in June-July 2009, they discussed the challenges and constraints in their families and community, and realized that they were food-insecure, even though they had land. They asked themselves why this was the case, and came to the following conclusion, as Rwamahe explained: *That is because we did not dig enough in our own gardens. Instead of planting food, one could go and dig for somebody else who can pay him so that he gets cash to pay the children's school fees. So by the time you finish up all your work, you come home when the season is already late and you can only plant a limited amount [for food] for yourself. Meanwhile the money you earned is no longer available – you have already*

*spent it.* The members subsequently decided to collect money for the group through a savings and credit scheme. From this, they could lend to each other to pay the children's school fees while they concentrated on production on their farms. They also knew from experience that many people digging together could cover very large areas in just a few hours. Now, they dig for each other, but they also hire out their labour to non-members. They are thereby able to raise enough money to pay school fees and meet other expenses. Working in a group is much more motivating and takes one much further than working on one's own, and having some 20 people working on a piece of land is very efficient.

### 3.10 Keeping Cash Flow Records for Transparency

In many groups, the use of record-keeping was introduced and encouraged. The records normally were basic income-expenditure-balance records of the money which was flowing through a member household. In addition to this, some families kept records of specific production, such as milk, eggs or some cash crop, although this was very rare. A few groups also drew up investment plans as part of their planning for the future. In general, it was challenging to commit everybody in a family to keeping records. Moreover, in order to facilitate usage, the records should be in a basic format that allowed easy reference. Despite these challenges, families appreciated the benefits of keeping records. The records enabled everyone in the family to clearly trace the household cash flow, and supported common decision-making.

However, keeping records required skills which not everybody had, as many of the farmers were illiterate. In some cases they were supported by their schoolgoing children.

### 3.11 Improved Family Collaboration

The introduction of cash flow records clearly improved collaboration within the farmer families, because they could see where the money went and had a documented and informed basis for discussion. Quarrels arising from accusations traded between family members were reduced, and it became evident to the family members, for example, that their total income may have increased.

#### **Box 9. Many groups had experiences and stories to share about generally improved collaboration within families**

In Joles's group one family met with the facilitator the day before they were to host the group. The family members were all present on the day of hosting such that they all learned with the group. After the group had left, the household could see that a lot of good work had been done and suggestions for improvements put forward which they could work on. Like in many other groups, they worked on common goals which they agreed on. This, among others, ensures that each member in the family works to achieve a common goal.

In Astaluz's group, one woman said, *'Now that we are food-secure and as women we have started earning income from the sale of our vegetables, there is more collaboration because we [women] are no longer a burden to our husbands.'* The idea that a woman could be a 'burden' to her husband may seem incongruous to outsiders, but in any case, conflict between husband and wife is often associated with poverty. One of the men in Janet's group recounted his experience: *'I work in town, and go home over the weekends. Before, I maybe bought some meat on my way home, but then my wife complained and said "Where are the onions, and where are the tomatoes?" That gave rise to a lot of quarrelling.'*

*Now, she has her own onions and her own tomatoes. Then the whole family is happy and we talk peacefully together.'*

Some participants explained that being able to discuss family conflicts in the group was a great help, because the group members started to trust each other more and even keep the knowledge within the group. In Mugisa's group, the members began to turn to each other and the facilitator in particular for assistance in solving problems in their families. Where previously, a family would perhaps go directly to the local council in the village, now they ask the facilitator to come and negotiate.

Josephat's group expanded very rapidly, growing from 26 to 101 families, after which it was split into four groups. One family in this village told us that the husband participated in one of these four groups, and the wife in another. In this way, they enjoyed 'double benefit', because they gained experience and knowledge from two groups and had two groups to help them on their farm. Their knowledge improved, and the discussions about farming at home had also raised much awareness among their children. After two years, Josephat has initiated a total of nine groups in this area.

By the end of the two-year project, a number of groups emphasized that the improved food security in combination with better collaboration within the families, building on common planning and decision-making, joint participation in groups as well as increased transparency of cash flows, had led to significant improvements in the farmer households. This underlined the importance of participation by the whole family in the groups, and the aptness of calling the groups 'Farmer Family Learning Groups'. We found that this term accurately

conveyed the real strength of the groups. In Box 10 below, we give an example of this by sharing what members of Astaluz's group told us.

**Box 10. An example of significant and life-changing experiences in the farmer household resulting from improved collaboration and food security**

Astaluz's group was a women's group. The members lived in the peri-urban area of Bwera, and all families had small farms, although some families also had some rented land for food crops farther away from their own farms. One reason for establishing a women's group was that many men worked outside the farm in the nearby town bordering Congo. When we visited the group in January 2011, we found to our great surprise that six husbands had since joined. One main reason was simply that some of the husbands had seen the benefits of the work in the group in terms of improved food security at home and surplus food products which could be sold. They thought that they could add something to the group, for example, by being the ones who could till the land. Then there was one husband who had wanted his wife to take out a loan from the newly established savings and credit scheme in the group. The wife told him that he could join the group and obtain his own loan, for why should her name be put on a loan that he might use for his own purpose? He ended up joining the group for this reason! Even though this might not seem like an exemplary reason for joining an FFLG, this particular case turned out well for everyone: more manpower and skills were added to the group, and it clearly benefitted collaboration in the families.

When we asked quite openly in the group what they perceived as the most significant change, one woman replied, after a brief silence, *'Less domestic violence.'* We asked her to explain, and she – as well as others in the group – attributed it to the improved food security, which reduced the incidence of arguments in the family. In addition to this, the families had also begun to keep records of cash flows, enabling everyone in the household to keep track of the money that went in and out. The collaboration in the families had simply improved, and the participation of both husbands and wives in the group added to this improvement.

### **3.12 Realizing the Potential of the Farms**

In many groups, the members started to practise farm planning. A farm plan in itself was a drawing or a map of the farm made by the farmer family themselves. Most farm plans included only the homestead and the surrounding land, and not land elsewhere which the farmer may have rented or acquired.

The farm plans helped give the farmer families a clearer picture of their own farms, as well as how they differed from those of their fellow group members. A family's awareness of the potential of their own farm could help them identify possible future improvements. The plans were often used in the groups to assist the farmer in suggesting new constructions and changes on the farm.

However, many farmer families which made their farm plans during the initial phase of the FFLGs did not follow up regularly and systematically. In such cases, the facilitators stepped in to provide encouragement.

### **3.13 Helping People in Need**

Many farmer groups lent a helping hand to weak and disadvantaged members and others in the local community. In Box 7, we saw how Alex's group helped an elderly member maintain her plantation and even took over the management of the land on a farm where the husband fell ill and eventually died. In the example in Box 11 below from Edith's group, the elderly were helped by fellow group members. Paul's and Hezron's groups tried to find solutions to address the plight of several orphans in their areas. All these initiatives increased the buildup of social capital within the groups as well as in the local community, and improved the social environment for all.

**Box 11. An example of how group members not only worked together but also provided help to each other and took particular care of those amongst them who were weaker**

The families in Edith's group lived close to Kasese. Each family's land holding was extremely small, and much of the effort in this group was directed towards intensifying the ecosystems of the gardens, as described in Box 1 above. The group members helped each other to open collection sites for non-degradable garbage. One focus of this group was to build improved stoves, so that they could save firewood and avoid smoke which affected the eyes and lungs of women and children. One elderly woman proudly showed off her stove, saying that it had been built in one afternoon by one of the other women in the group. It had improved her life very much, in addition to the vegetables she had started growing by herself, and the strength she felt she gained from eating more healthy food and from being involved in the work with the other women.

In Paul's group, a number of families were immigrants. They described how their participation in a farmer group had helped them become more integrated and accepted in the community. Through the group, they had quite quickly established contacts with other families, and trust was built up. The farmer groups were described as 'little families' where people felt comfortable being together, and the focus on helping those in need improved the coherence in the group and the links to the local communities.

Even in cases where members faced severe difficulties, their group stepped in to help them out, like in the example given below from Janet's group.

### **Box 12. An example where a group helped two elderly female members in dire straits**

Janet's group included two elderly widows, neither of whom had children or other family members around. One of the women had lost her husband shortly before the group was formed, and the children from the husband's first marriage came to kick her out from her house and land. The group stepped in to negotiate on behalf of the woman, who had nowhere else to live, and they reached a settlement under which she could stay on.

The other widow lived on a very poorly maintained small farm, and the group helped her improve the house. They built a latrine and an improved stove. Through the group's savings and credit scheme, she could buy one sow, which soon after gave birth to eight piglets, which she could sell to earn money. Her life improved greatly, and she was able to support herself on what she could grow on her piece of land.

### **3.14 Building Social Capital in the Local Community**

Several examples above indicate that the local community surrounding a Farmer Family Learning Group benefitted from the activities in the group. The benefits could be very direct, like in the example from Janet's group given below in Box 13, where farmers from the group interacted actively with the surrounding community to improve the villagers' level of farming knowledge in general. In many groups, the neighbouring farmers became exposed to the improvements on the group participants' farms, and copied what they saw. In some other cases there was direct interaction where group members demonstrated farming practices and helped their neighbours. The benefits could also come out of the work in the group itself, such as improved hygiene around the farms and in the village, and



digging of trenches which improved the water catchment and sometimes protected roads in the village or fields (including neighbours' fields) against erosion.

**Box 13. A story of involving the community on a broader scale, as told by participants in Janet's group**

In Janet's group, based near Bwera close to the Congo border, each group member made plans for how they wanted to develop their farms. When the group met at a certain farm, the host farmer family would share their plan with the other group members. The whole group would discuss the plan and give each other advice. Acting on their plans and the advice of fellow members, the families were able to bring about considerable improvements to their farms within a short time. The trust between families not only significantly improved the lives in their own households, but also exerted a positive influence on the community. The village had been hit by a spate of thefts. While some of the thefts were committed by outsiders, young people from the village also sometimes entered neighbours' lands to take fruit and other things to eat. The group therefore agreed to share as much as possible of their knowledge and show neighbours what they did in their gardens. This proved to be a way of building up capacity on a broader basis. The improved network, new culture of sharing knowledge and helpful attitude reduced the number of thefts, as well as feelings of jealousy and resentment, in the village.

Groups which produced seeds, seedlings or tree seedlings often had more than enough for the members and gave or sold some to the local community. The improved food production in general also meant that there was more local and healthy, fresh and diverse food to buy for other villagers. Tree-planting took place in many groups, and this improved the village environment as well.

Some groups took the initiative to improve conditions in the village, which required a lot of work. In Josephat's group, the members pooled their efforts to improve a road which had been badly damaged by erosion. Other groups established common areas where animals could be kept overnight to protect them from thieves, and this also benefitted many in the community.

### 3.15 Recognition by the Surrounding Society

As illustrated in section 3.14 above, the groups and the group members started becoming recognized by their local communities as important partners in the development of the community. Many politicians (from LC1 in particular) joined the farmer groups to create connections and link up with the group.

As a result of this broader recognition, the groups were often deemed deserving of loans or donations from NAADS. Many groups received funding from NAADS during the project period, sometimes in the form of seeds or livestock. Livestock was often donated on condition that their offspring would be given to other farmers in the group. However, some facilitators questioned the way in which some of the donations were given out. They felt that when a donation was given to one individual farmer, this tended to arouse envy and suspicion among the local community. The donation may have been given to somebody who was seen as a 'model farmer' but instead of inspiring others, it became a source of resentment.

A strong group often had the human and social capacity to overcome this problem and find ways of sharing and integrating the donated resources into the group activities. In many cases, the collective knowledge and interaction within the group increased the benefit of the donation. For instance, some donated

animals died because the farmers were not properly trained in keeping them, but in a group, they could benefit from the knowledge of many more people. This increased the animals' chances of surviving. In some cases, the group invested jointly in feed and constructions. One group explicitly said that they did not want any donations, but would rather rely on their own efforts to buy and improve.

Over the two-year period of the project, a few groups also developed strong advocacy skills, speaking out for improvements in their conditions or surroundings. After raising the issue with the authorities, one group succeeded in getting a road built which greatly improved access to their village. This same group also managed to have their area recognized as a Local Council 2 (LC2).

SATNET has also organized meetings, attended by politicians up to ministerial level, to explain the FFLG approach and to increase awareness of the farming conditions in the region.

### **3.16 Flexible Implementation Makes the FFLG Approach Relevant to All Groups**

Flexibility is a cornerstone of the FFLG approach. The argument for flexibility is clear: different groups are faced with different circumstances and have different backgrounds. Some have small farms and easy access to the market, such as Astaluz's and Janet's groups, whose members go to the market at the Congo border twice every week. The members of other groups – such as Eson's and Joles's groups – had larger plots of land and enjoyed good yields, but lived in remote areas very far from markets. These groups now sell certified organic coffee, which calls for new focus areas for the entire group. Some groups were formed in camps for internally displaced people, while

others were communities of elders or had many orphans – all these groups faced their own distinct challenges.

**Box 14. Examples of various ways of organizing farmer groups. These examples illustrate the flexibility of the FFLG approach, which is guided by different farmer communities' different needs**

- Chris's group consisted of eight farmer families. They had high ambitions for the group, and helped each other build compost pits, animal enclosures, and improved kitchen gardens and cash crop plots. This seemed to be a close-knit group working together on an equal footing to reach their common goals.
- Didas's group was mainly made up of women. It had started out in 1998 as a drama group and self-help group dealing mostly with issues relating to HIV/AIDS, which heavily burdened this area. When their contact person in the local NGO came back from the SATNET facilitator course, the members started developing the group as an FFLG with focus on improved agricultural methods and began working together on their farms. They also established a common vegetable garden, where they cultivated a huge crop of banana suckers. Besides these, they produced cakes made from bananas and handicrafts such as baskets and mats for joint sale.
- Other facilitators (e.g., Paul and Vincent) experienced rapid expansion. Vincent's group comprised 53 member families who all participated in a savings and credit scheme. Within this group, internal facilitators led four working groups which rotated on the farms and learned from each other, but not all the 53 families took part in these groups. (The concept of internal facilitators is further explained in section 3.17.)
- Alex initiated a new group when he came back from the facilitator course. He started talking with two fellow farmers in the neighbouring village. Together they decided to form a group, and they asked other farmers in the village to

join. Within a few months they had a group of 15 farmer families altogether. They then initiated another group within the same community, consisting of families who had seen their approach and wanted to join. This group consisted of 20 families in 2010. In addition, the groups sometimes freely assisted other village members when they needed help to weed or mulch, and in this way supported the whole community.

- Musana and Yeremia lived only a few kilometres apart on the other side of the Nduguto river, approximately 30 km from Bundibugyo. When they came back from the facilitator course, they formed their respective groups, in which they themselves also participated as farmers. After two years, the number of farmer families who wanted to join had increased to 130. The facilitators looked for ways to form new groups and to educate more facilitators. Both Musana and Yeremia worked hard to set good examples for other group members, and also tried out any new practices first before recommending them to the others. There was much networking between these two facilitators and also between their groups; they sometimes made exchange visits, visiting up to six farms together in one day to learn from the farmers' experiences.

The groups therefore used different approaches in terms of prioritization of their issues. The families organized themselves in ways which were relevant to them, in terms of both focus and structure. Whatever route a group took, however, the final destination was the same: sustainable food security, income generation, harmony within and among households, and social capital building.

### **3.17 Internal Facilitators Gradually Taking Over**

As explained in section 2.2 above, we introduced in the project the concept of external facilitators and internal facilitators. The

main idea behind this was that the external facilitator should be a person from a SATNET member organization who had been educated in facilitation skills and group dynamics. This external facilitator should guide and facilitate the group in the beginning. If the group already existed before being transformed into an FFLG, then the facilitator should introduce the FFLG concept and make sure that the group builds its work on the principles of ownership, commitment, trust and respect. In the first months of operation, the group in collaboration with the facilitator will then identify a person who will be ready to take over the responsibility of facilitation. This person, called an internal facilitator, should be guided by and interact with the external facilitator.

This system worked quite well in most groups. In some groups, the external facilitator stayed on and became a part of the group. In others, the external facilitator left the group under the guidance of the internal facilitator and visited it periodically. The idea was that the process of taking over the facilitation of the group should be gradual and guided by the external facilitator. It was also very important to forge linkages between the internal facilitator and other groups in order to encourage exchange of experiences.

In two groups, however, the transition from external to internal facilitator was an abrupt one, as explained in Box 15 below. Nevertheless the transition went quite well although not without challenges in one case. The example illustrates the importance of guidance; in this case the project team partly managed to link the internal facilitators up to a network of external facilitators who had had more training. However, this example also highlights the risk of failure if a facilitator has no experience with or understanding of the FFLG approach.

**Box 15. Hezron and Mugisa were both internal facilitators who took over a group at a very early stage and with very little training. Their experiences show that time and support are needed to understand the process and the nature of facilitation**

In two groups, the external facilitator left very shortly after the initiation of the FFLG, and an internal facilitator was appointed who had very little training. In Hezron's case, his appointment happened in time to allow him to participate in a four-day post-training course for the external facilitators. This exposed him to many discussions about facilitation and the concept of the farmer groups. Hezron's group consisted of 17 farmer families (32 group members) who lived in a mountainous area. In developing their farms, they sought to control soil erosion, mainly by digging trenches and planting trees. This was followed by the selection of highly diversified cash crops like Irish potatoes, garlic, beans, peas (a special type which matured in 60 days), coffee, onions, passion fruit and barley for beer production. They also kept goats and chickens. This group also bought land for building a store for the cash crops, planned for 2011.

The other internal facilitator, Mugisa, started out without any basic training, although he was supported by NOGAMU's and SATNET's team. With members who lived in a camp for internally displaced people after the unrest in the early 2000s, his group faced major challenges. The members gradually started returning to their farms and also farmed on their land while living in a house in the camp village. Their homesteads were in a very poor condition and, to add to their challenges, they had a low level of knowledge of agricultural practices. In addition, there were many orphans in the village, whom the families tried to take care of. The group concentrated very much on building social capital in the process of improving their agricultural practices, and gradually built up good interpersonal relationships.

We identified one major challenge related to letting an internal facilitator take over the work with a Farmer Family Learning Group – whether the group would be receptive to being guided by a fellow farmer. One of the internal facilitators put it this way: *'You cannot become a prophet among your own people.'* There is therefore a need to create an understanding that a facilitator is not a 'prophet' but a guide who works with fellow farmers, who all take ownership of the group but form an alliance with the facilitator to let him or her facilitate the meetings.

### 3.18 Networks of Farmers and Farmer Groups

Every member of an FFLG is open to hosting and being hosted by the other members. Within the group, a mutual trust is built, and they progress together. The facilitators as well as the farmers in the project realized that there was a huge resource of knowledge and skills within a group, especially when including whole families.

A continuous development of the groups could, however, be further inspired by establishing networks with other facilitators and groups, and making exchange visits. This was practised to some degree, mostly by the facilitators who visited other groups and brought new ideas gained from these visits home to their own group. Groups which were facilitated by the same external facilitator sometimes lived within walking distance from each other, which made exchange visits easier. In other cases, such visits would require greater coordination and some funds for transport. The funds could be taken from the savings and credit box if necessary, but at the end of the two-year project, most farmer groups had still not reached a point where they had exhausted the pool of resources within their own group to such a degree that they prioritized new inspiration from other groups.



### 3.19 Failure to Identify with Work on Demonstration Plots

Almost all groups took as the starting point of their activities their members' own farms. This was a major reason for naming the groups 'Farmer Family Learning Groups' – the families learned together from each other's farms.

One group was given a piece of land by a family to be converted into a demonstration plot for the group. This group was unable to develop a sustainable basis for continuing, and many members lost interest. In another group, the facilitator cultivated a very well-managed diversified garden on her own land, but did not manage to impart the lessons from this experience to the families in the group, whose farms still had not improved after one-and-a-half years.

After discussing these problems with the team of facilitators, we concluded that the commitment to staying in a group takes root in the process of working on the members' own farms and finding solutions there to existing problems. Often, the group members share the same challenges, and focusing on their own day-to-day reality, first and foremost, makes participation and learning in the group more relevant for them.

### 3.20 Setting a Good Example

Many farmers explained that visits by their fellow group members had led to improvements on their farm because, among other reasons, they felt that they should maintain it well to set a good example for the visitors. This was described in the following way by a farmer in Monday's group: *'We have to work hard together as a family and make sure that our home is an example to other homes. If you play host, and members find that your home is dirty and disorganized, you feel embarrassed*

*and then start to improve, so that next time you do not face a similar embarrassment.'*

The notion of setting a good example was particularly strongly held by some facilitators. They felt the need to become 'model farmers' themselves, like Musana and Yeremia, whose groups were described in Box 14.

In the discussions in the network of facilitators, it was seen as a good thing for a facilitator to draw, from his or her own experience, insights on the improvements recommended and initiated in the farmer group. However, it was also emphasized that a skilled facilitator need not also be a 'perfect farmer'.

### **3.21 When a Group Fails to Build Up Social Capital**

In one group, a very tragic and unfortunate event paralyzed the group as well as the project team. Some group members had been involved in the stoning of a 10-year-old boy in a case of chicken theft.

In the project team, we tried to gain a better understanding of what happened. We concluded that we faced the case of a group which, for several reasons, had not managed to build up the necessary social capital, trust and abilities to manage problems in their group. This served as a tragic example of a weak group where human and social capital had not been cultivated. The case also illustrated the major challenges some groups face in their local communities, where such things can happen. We expect that in properly functioning groups, the members will emphasize fairness and sensibility when confronted with cases like this.

### 3.22 Keeping a Group Coherent

One group fell apart after member families moved back to their farms from the internally displaced persons' camp where they had lived for a number of years. The group had been created when all members were still staying in the camp. Over a period of years, the farmers gradually returned to their farms, which meant that the distance between the group members increased considerably. For all their good intentions and interest, the group could not overcome this challenge and eventually collapsed because of dropouts due to the long walking distance. Based on this experience, we in the project team concluded that at any time a group should be made up of farmer families living in the same area. If and when any farmers start to move far away, they should be encouraged to form new groups.

### 3.23 The Most Significant Change: 'Interrelationships Through Working Together'

At the end of the two-year project, the project team asked the facilitators to discuss with their group members what had been the most significant change brought about by the FFLG approach. In this way each group should select its own 'Most Significant Change story' (MSC story). Most groups ended up discussing the improvements which had had an impact on their livelihoods in general, but all facilitators subsequently came to an evaluation meeting with a few keywords which encapsulated the changes. Through a group interactive process they then further summarized the key changes that had taken place in their groups and local communities, arriving at the following shortlist:

- Strengthened interrelationships
- Food security

- Unity through working together
- Planning and management of land use
- Working together
- Interpersonal relationships.

In the plenary discussion they finally decided that the single most significant change could be summed up as 'interrelationships through working together'. The facilitators concluded that 'working together' and 'interrelationships' could be interchanged and the phrase would still remain meaningful. They also concluded that the improved food security and the focused planning of land use were both results of the stronger relationships that had been forged in families as well as in local communities.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# **SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL COMMUNITIES SUPPORTED BY THE FFLG APPROACH**

IN this booklet, we have presented some cases which illustrate the improvements realized and challenges faced in the course of the two-year project, as related by the participants and observed in our visits to the farmer groups. All the groups were visited twice by members from the three organizations in the project team, NOGAMU, SATNET and Organic Denmark.

We are well aware that two years is a very narrow time span which may not lend itself to in-depth discussions of sustainability. Nevertheless, we observed significant changes in many groups. We found it particularly encouraging that all this happened without direct material aid to the groups. While some groups managed to link up to NAADS and acquire loans or donations, the project in itself was based on the idea of non-donorship and the belief that donations in most cases leave people dependent on aid, as shown in the example in Box 4 above.

Sustainability can be defined in terms of a local community's ability to mobilize resources in terms of social and other forms of capital (natural, human, financial and produced capital). If we view sustainability in this light, the FFLG approach seems to contribute much to sustainable development, judging from the diversity and wealth of resources which were mobilized, almost exclusively based on the groups' own initiatives, during

the relatively short project period. The groups set common goals, and the group members helped each other to achieve them.

The project team discussed the issue of sustainability with all the external and internal facilitators at the evaluation meeting held towards the end of the two-year period. We viewed sustainability as encompassing four different aspects:

- Ecological/environmental sustainability
- Economic sustainability
- Social sustainability
- Institutional sustainability.

As became obvious from the many stories from the groups in Chapter 3, many farmer families improved their livelihoods and contributed as group members to significant local community development. These outcomes are indicative of sustainability because the improvements were driven and owned by the members themselves. The FFLGs had set their goals and worked to reach them. It seemed that, especially with regard to social and environmental sustainability, much had improved. Economic sustainability, meanwhile, was supported by improved income-generating activities and enhanced food security in the families, as well as connected to social capital building due to increased transparency in decision-making and the recording of cash flows within households.

In very many ways, the groups faced severe challenges in realizing all aspects of sustainability: environmental, economic, social as well as institutional challenges. Many areas were devastated due to deforestation, overuse and increased population pressure, which meant the land could not lie fallow between production periods. In addition to this, the increasingly

erratic weather conditions resulting from climate change also presented major challenges, for example, because the time for sowing and harvesting to some extent also became unpredictable. Market conditions, with fluctuating prices influenced, among others, by large companies and global players, were very difficult to predict as well. Despite all these challenges, the level of control over production and food sovereignty seemed to have improved in many groups, and we perceive this as a strong element of sustainable development.

Many aspects of the FFLG approach were strongly supported and inspired by theories of social capital, for example, that developed by a team of psychologists led by John Munene,<sup>6</sup> who defines social capital as an individual's willingness to make sacrifices on a short-term basis for the long-term benefit of a local community as well as the individual himself or herself, by setting common goals and interacting to meet these goals. As Munene emphasized in one of our meetings, 'Moving out of poverty is not action, it is interaction.' Since the environment keeps people poor, it is only logical that the environment should be taken into account in making strategies to move out of poverty, and nobody can manage the situation alone as one individual. Networks and building social capital can help people to take decisions which will improve their lives. Alcoholism, spending money on short-term pleasures and selling off a potential source of income such as land to move to town, are examples of decisions which can entrap a person in continued poverty, and as such they can be defined as 'poverty carriers'.

Our approach to Farmer Family Learning Groups builds very much on these ideas, and a number of the stories from the

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<sup>6</sup> J.C. Munene, S. Schwartz and G.M. Kibanja (2005), *Escaping from Behavioural Poverty in Uganda: The Role of Culture and Social Capital*.

groups are testament to this: interacting within the family and within the local community creates a basis for communication and learning which supports informed decision-making. For instance, when a family's cash flow records show that money is being spent on short-term pleasures instead of education expenditures for the children and other long-term investments, then it is difficult for a person to only pin the blame on circumstances and misfortunes for the situation he or she is in. Furthermore, if information like this is shared in a farmer group, the unwise decisions are exposed and a sort of social control comes into play. In other words, when activities like record-keeping are encouraged in a group, and when the group members become more familiar with each other through regular meetings and start trusting each other, then a stream of response and feedback processes influence the general thinking and formation of norms in a local community. Envy and suspicion are gradually replaced by understanding and respect as the group grows in maturity, and cooperation is proven to be more healthy and supportive of the development of everyone in the group than competition. Indeed, social capital became the strongest and most important factor for development in the groups. This was a fact which was recognized both by the project team and by the farmers, as shown in the MSC discussion.

The weakest aspect of sustainability in this project turned out to be institutional sustainability. Many groups had not developed sufficient knowledge and understanding as well as approaches to jointly speak out, mobilize efforts and identify issues at the community and societal levels. This was no surprise to the participants or to the project team, since this aspect of sustainability requires a great deal of organization and skills, along with capacity within the participating organizations. The struggles to improve farming and generate income, and to build networks and trust, all seem to be preconditions for



strengthening the capacity of a group to influence policymaking and interact with the surrounding society in a relevant and targeted manner.

## CHAPTER FIVE

# CONCLUDING REMARKS AND PERSPECTIVES FOR THE FUTURE

WE see Farmer Family Learning Groups as groups of farmer families who together define their needs and goals in relation to their own future development as individuals, families and as a group – and then help each other to reach these goals. In the process they form strong networks and help each other, as well as help the broader local community in numerous ways. They build up social capital, which has been identified as one of the most crucial elements of the FFLG approach. The importance of involving whole families became evident in the course of this project, and we consider this a key to the success of many groups. Husbands, wives and children all need support and can support each other in a joint empowerment process where all share responsibility and nobody is depowered.

The FFLG approach also fits well with the ideas of organic farming, which we see as farming done in accordance with the organic principles of ecology, care, fairness and health, with the use of agro-ecological farm practices. Agro-ecology requires knowledge, skills and some labour power. Farmer groups where knowledge is developed and workload and experiences shared, seem to be a very relevant approach to developing this way of farming so that food security is attained and the environment gradually forms a resilient framework for the life around the farmer families.

The beauty of this approach lies in its flexibility and its strong and clear foundation on values like respect, trust, equality, common learning, building up human and social capital, ownership and commitment. These values are relevant and meaningful to each participant and learner, who can take ownership of the approach and develop it in their own context. We call it 'the approach which is owned by everybody who uses it, and cannot be patented'. Many group approaches are based on similar principles and seek to build on the same values, and we hope that this little booklet can inspire everyone looking to support approaches which are owned by all the participants. Flexibility and the sharing of ownership are principles which must never be violated. Only the group members themselves can guide their own development in ways which are relevant to them and the group as a whole. The facilitator has the task of facilitating the process of identifying challenges and finding the solutions. This process is rooted in the acceptance that each individual and each family and group holds the key to their own development.

# APPENDIX

## THE PROJECT PARTNERS

THE FFLG project was jointly initiated by three organizations all focused on organic, agro-ecological and sustainable farming: the National Organic Agricultural Movement of Uganda (NOGAMU), the Sustainable Agriculture Trainers Network (SATNET) and Organic Denmark (OD).

NOGAMU is a non-governmental organization which was founded in 2001 with the following mission: 'NOGAMU shall coordinate and promote sustainable organic agricultural development, networking and marketing.' NOGAMU is an umbrella organization which mainly organizes farmers and smaller organizations and facilitates contact between them through organization of training sessions and meetings, and works for their common interests in relation to marketing possibilities. NOGAMU works to build capacity among all stakeholders involved in agriculture in Uganda, to promote local and international marketing of organic products from Uganda, to increase the application of organic standards and certified organic production, and to increase awareness of and attract support for organic agriculture in Uganda. NOGAMU has corporate and individual members representing more than 1 million farmers and 250,000 ha of certified organic land, as well as an unknown number of hectares under organic and/or agro-ecological cultivation.

*NATIONAL ORGANIC AGRICULTURAL MOVEMENT OF  
UGANDA (NOGAMU)*

*PO Box 70071, Clock Tower Kampala, Uganda*

*Physical location: Plot 957 Galukande Close, Off Tankhill Road,  
Muyenga*

*Tel: +256 414 269415, +256 312 264039, +256 772 912250*

*Email: [admin@nogamu.org.ug](mailto:admin@nogamu.org.ug)*

*Website: [www.nogamu.org.ug](http://www.nogamu.org.ug)*

SATNET is an indigenous umbrella network of sustainable agriculture trainers' organizations operating in seven districts (Kabarole, Kasese, Kamwenge, Kyenjojo, Bundibugyo, Ntoroko and Kyegegwa) of the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda. It was founded in 2000 by 11 founding organizations, and now has 51 member organizations. SATNET has created a trainers' network in sustainable agriculture to improve the livelihoods of the communities, particularly the farming community, by empowering them through building the capacity of organizations to effectively and efficiently deliver services to the communities. The goal of SATNET is 'an empowered, gender-responsive society in a safe and bio-diverse environment'; towards this end, it seeks 'to improve the livelihood of the farming community through capacity building of member organizations and their trainers, advocacy, networking, research on sustainable and organic agriculture production and marketing systems'. SATNET aims at lobbying and advocating for formulation and implementation of farmer-friendly and realistic policies and government programmes. The organization works to enhance sustainable agriculture capacities in general and promote participatory research and utilization of research information as well as farmer-driven agri-business initiatives and all networking initiatives in general.

*SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE TRAINERS NETWORK (SATNET)*

*PO Box 884, Fort Portal Town, Uganda*

*Physical location: Plot 6A Mugurusi Road, Fort Portal*

*Tel: +256 483 422487*

*Email: admin@satnet.org.ug, satnet@utonline.co.ug*

*Website: www.satnet.org.ug*

OD was founded in 1981 with the mission of developing organic agriculture in a local, national and international context. Its vision is to unite, cooperate and develop primary organic agricultural production, processing of organic produce, consumers, marketing people for organic produce, scientists, teachers and extension staff in organic agriculture. OD bases its approach on the four IFOAM principles of health, care, fairness and ecology. OD presently consists of 4,631 members, covering farmers (about 20%), traders, companies, consumers, consultants, scientists, students and citizens from all over Denmark.

*ORGANIC DENMARK GLOBAL ORGANIC*

*Silkeborgvej 260, 8230 Aabyhøj, Denmark*

*Tel: +4587322700*

*Email: info@okologi.dk*

*Website: www.okologi.dk*

## About the Authors

**Mette Vaarst**, DVM PhD, is a senior scientist at the Institute of Animal Science in Aarhus University, Denmark who has researched aspects of organic farming since 1991. She has a Master's degree in health anthropology and has experience in action research. She has worked in research and as a volunteer worker with participatory learning groups of farmers in Kenya, Uganda, India and Europe, especially in Denmark where she was a co-developer of the Danish Stable School approach.

**Jane Nalunga** is the Agricultural Training Officer for NOGAMU, where she has acquired hands-on experience in designing practical solutions to farmers' observed constraints. She sets up organic internal control systems for farmers' groups dealing in organic production and export. She organizes and implements training of farmers, farmers' groups and extension personnel in production, soil fertility, pest management, harvesting and post-harvest handling, and designs training material.

**Thaddeo Tibasiima** is in charge of agricultural research at SATNET covering livestock and crop production. He sets up research trials as a learning tool for farmers. He handles domestication of rare breeds and plants, and organizes and conducts inter-farmer learning exchange visits. He also handles training sessions in organic and sustainable farming, as well as the production of training material. He has been the day-to-day mentor and coach in the development of the FFLGs.

**Aage Dissing**, who holds a Master of Science degree in Agriculture, is an organic farming consultant. He has experience in participatory training programmes and project management. He worked with two Ugandan companies that developed a processing plant for sun-dried organic fruits, where he was

involved in the training of farmers, management and processing staff and the board. Besides working on the FFLG project, he also trains farmer group facilitators in a project in Bolivia led by the Danish company Aurion.

**Inge Lis Dissing** is a Danish teacher and organic farming consultant with experience in participatory training programmes and project management. Together with Aage Dissing, she worked with the two Ugandan companies on the sun-dried organic fruits venture. The work included training of farmers, training of internal inspectors for organic fair trade projects and training processing staff. Apart from the FFLG project, she is also involved, with Aage Dissing, in the Aurion-led project in Bolivia.





## THE RWENZORI EXPERIENCE

This booklet is a portrait of a unique participatory learning project involving farming communities in the Rwenzori region of Western Uganda. The project brought rural households together in 'Farmer Family Learning Groups' (FFLGs) with the aim of enhancing community food security.

Guided by a facilitator, the families in each group supported one another in their farming activities, working together, sharing knowledge and learning from each other's experiences. Through such collaboration and the use of organic and agro-ecological farming methods, the FFLGs have brought about increased yields and improved livelihoods for member families. In cooperating on the farm, members also came to enjoy closer relationships off it, within and among their families as well as in the broader local community.

This booklet, written by the coordinators of the FFLG project, looks at the guiding principles behind the project, how it has worked in practice, the successes achieved and challenges faced. As the authors explain, the Rwenzori Experience is one which highlights the value of a collaborative approach to food security and sustainable development. It is an 'approach which is owned by everybody who uses it, and cannot be patented'.

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