

HOW AGGREGATION HAS TRANSFORMED LIVES IN THARAKA NITHI COUNTY

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Some 175 kilometers East of Nairobi is Tharaka Nithi County, a county that lies on the foothills of Mt Kenya, and enjoys temperatures of between 11^o- 25.9^o Celsius, and an average rainfall of between 200- 800mm.

Although the county is so close to the mountain it experiences critical challenges as it lies on a semi-arid region that is partly dominated by desertic rocky vegetation making farming challenging.

For years farmers tried their hand in farming with no success at all as their crops either dried prematurely due lack of sufficient rainfall or even failed to germinate due to substandard seeds, necessitating for relief food in the region.

In the recent past though, the situation has changed thanks to group formation that has made aggregation possible a thing that has really benefited farmers from saving on many costs that include transport to managing to negotiate for inputs when purchasing in large quantities.

In assisting farmers, different organizations and governments came in so as to equip farmers with the right information, training and practices that appertains to farming and have them get equipped with the best farming practices as well as have them farm the right crops that are adapted to the region.

For one farmers were required to be registered in well organized groups for better co-ordination in trainings and information delivery.



Some thriving crops in Kajuki region

With registered groups another advantage arose as different non-governmental organizations like GRADIF-K came in handy to offer guidance in terms of trainings.

Some of the changes that were critical to start with were first on the nature of the crops grown, and two on the kind of farming practices that farmers embarked on. Farmers were required to grow crops that are adapted to the region, crops that don't require much rain such as: millet sorghum, cowpeas and cassava among other crops.

Over the last five years, transformations have been evident as gradually farmers are seen to move from being government reliant to self-reliant with better skills and income.

Groups like Gakiuma, Kamukanya, Muchure Muteithia, Kianda Community Based Organization and Mithigine Network in Tunyai among others are good examples where numbers grew overwhelmingly after complying with the training offered.

Some of the trainings included soil conservation, varieties crops adapted to the region, right use of farm inputs, conservation agriculture, group formation, integrated farming, water harvesting, agribusiness, record keeping, agro forestry, fruit farming, land use planning and management among other skills.



A market day in the region where farmers trade their livestock

Today, the groups and networks not only use certified seeds but they also enjoys a bumper harvest season in season out. It is for this reason that some groups and networks have managed to secure contracts with the East African Breweries and Tegemeo Cereal Enterprise Limited, offering them market for their produce. Transformations in the region are thus evident as jobs have been created and stable incomes established.

Transformations are also evident in other groups trained by GRADIF-K as apart from the groups managing to diversify to different types cereals, they also manage to secure a proper storage facility where the cereals are stored. This is contrary to the traditional storage methods that they previously used to employ where a significant percentage of their produce used to go bad or even get consumed by rodents.

To ensure competitiveness, most groups have embarked on going a step further to clear their cereals so as to attract better markets. Equipped with knowledge and better markets the groups aim at improving their volumes and secure more contracts with different companies.