

WOMEN IN AGRICULTURE

By Caroline Wambui

In the heart of Tunyai Tharaka Constituency in Tharaka Nithi County is a group of women singing and dancing. In spite of the din, the high powered voices can't be ignored. These are voices of a women group: Mithigine Network celebrating a bumper harvests at their collection centre in Gakiuma Tunyai. But the key thing that cannot escape one's mind is how the group has managed such a bumper harvest amidst the dry desertic region.

“It is out of the different challenges we were facing as farmers that we decided to unite and find a solution to our farming challenges,” Esther Wanja a member of the group explains adding that, “to start with we formed six groups each with a minimum of 10-12 members a total of 89. Our main objective was to first acquire high quality certified seeds, seeds approved by the government for quality production. To achieve this, we partnered with seed growers companies and with organizations that could train us on farming techniques and GRADIF-K a nongovernmental organization came in handy and trained us on soil conservation, varieties crops adapted to the region, right use of farm inputs, conservation agriculture, group formation, how to

develop a proposal among other key issues in farming,” she attests.



Purity Gateria at her farm tending to her cereals

With this, the group members' number doubled to accommodate 162 active members and in turn transforming into a network. For proper management, the network subdivided into two where one group was to deal with cereals and the other on horticulture produce.

“Our groups have remained intact since formation out of the many trainings conducted by GRADIF-K. The knowledge we have acquired in the groups has even made some members trainers of trainers, such that any new member who joins the group directly acquires the info from the already existing members which plays a greater role in increasing our membership. The groups have also grown to be independent in that they have established financial freedom by not only linking up with the financiers but by also establishing their own financial plans where members can save and access soft loans,” Purity Gateria the group's chair ascertains.

By taking farming to the next level, Gateria further explains that the network has attracted the likes of the youth who previously had viewed farming as a ‘dirty job’ to viewing it as a form of employment as it has not only generated income for them but also made them responsible members in the society.

Today the group is able to acquire quality farm inputs by purchasing them in large quantities at subsidized prices and later subdividing the inputs as per the requirements in the groups. Loans are also acquired by the group members to the different financiers through group guarantee mechanisms.

Equipped with the knowhow and financial empowerment the group members then embark on conservation agriculture that entails minimal or no cultivation and lots of mulching to conserve both the soil nutrients and reduce any form of water loss through evaporation. To also increase their chances of a bumper harvest, the groups also embarks on farming crops that are adapted to the region and especially cereals like sorghum, millet and pigeon peas contrally to other non trained farmers in the region who opt to plant maize which they say is easy to sell only for the produce to dry up prematurely leading to food insecurity in the region.



A section of a farm depicting a bumper harvest

Judith Musyoka a member of the network says that she has no regret whatever for farming cereals like sorghum as initially she lacked good harvests which in itself presented a multiple of problems that included lacking enough to feed her family and a means of educating her three children. She attributes the crop's success to its deep penetrating roots that enable it to tolerate drought and thrive in marginal sites adding that, "The crop can withstand high rainfall and even some water logging and is resistant to diseases and damage," she says. Musyoka further advocates the crop to other farmers saying that it not only conserves moisture by reducing transpiration when stressed by rolling its leaves and closing its stomata to reduce evaporation but it can also turn down its metabolic processes and retreat into near dormancy until the rains return.

When it comes to tending the crops, the right farming techniques are employed with the right input application as too much fertilizers can scorch the seeds or plants while too little means that the crops cannot grow to full potential. Some of the techniques employed by group members that have helped conserve soil moisture and enhanced productivity entail mulching, drip irrigation, ZALPIT technology among other technologies that have really helped her conserve the soil moisture and reap bountifully.



A section of a farm depicting life amidst a dry desertic region

When it comes to harvesting and storage the knowledge the farmers have acquired on post harvest handling from GRADIF-K comes in handy so as to ensure contaminated free produce. The moisture content of the cereals is checked by having one contracted member who goes round farmers stores checking on the harvests suitability before storage is done. Grading is also done before storage to ensure quality produce. The network's unity that the members attribute to GRADIF-K trainings include training on integrated farming, water harvesting, agribusiness, record keeping, agro forestry, fruit farming, land use planning and management among other skills has enabled them secure a concrete stable market by not only meeting the set standards but also meeting the required tonnage in terms of volumes. Currently the network has secured a contract with one of the Kenya's leading brewing company East African Breweries Limited, securing them a steady market and assuring them of a steady income. The network is still working towards securing contracts with other companies.

To ensure competitiveness in the market, the network cleans some of its cereals and is planning to upgrade and add value to the cereals by making their own flour

Farming in the region has thus not just transformed the region but it has also transformed women lives by creating employment and enabling them educate their children, ensure a food secure society and improve their household structure and furnishings.