



CommonGround Project **NEWSLETTER**

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COMMONGROUND AND NTOROKO DISTRICT CONDUCT JOINT ACTIVITY MONITORING

The CommonGround Project organised a joint monitoring visit with the Ntoroko District Local Government to evaluate the status of the project operations in the target communities. The project in Ntoroko district is being implemented in the sub-counties of Karugutu (Nyambigha and Itojo) and Nombe (Musandama and Nyakatoke).

During the visit, communities presented their household and community plans (Participatory Integrated Plans—PIPs), and after, both CommonGround and Ntoroko DLG officials visited some of the activities that the community has so far implemented since the inception of the project. From the field visits, some households had already established trenches in their gardens to control erosion; others had planted grasses along the hills but also on the trenches to stabilise the soils; while others had opened community access roads to ease the transportation of their produce to the nearby markets, among others.

Maj. (Rtd) Johanes Mugabirwe, the RDC for Ntoroko District, cautioned the residents against environmental depletions resulting from tree cutting and applauded the CG project for coming up to support communities to restore the degraded environment. Busobozi Ivan, who represented the CAO, thanked the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Kampala for funding CG, which is supplementing government extension services in the district. He called on communities to embrace the project and

own it if they want to continue having good results. He emphasised that CG is helping smallholder farmers to improve their wellbeing but will also increase the Government of Uganda Gross Domestic Product.





COMMUNITIES IN KABALE DISTRICT ADOPT TRENCHES TO MANAGE EROSION IN THEIR GARDENS.

Many highland smallholder farming communities in the Kigezi region face numerous environmental challenges that result in poor farming systems and, hence, low farm productivity. The communities say all this is because they lack the skills and knowledge to solve such challenges.

To change the situation, the CommonGround Project was introduced in these communities, and through the various farming system trainings, the communities have started establishing trenches and planting grass along the slopes to control erosion.

Kate Shabahurira is a PIP innovator from Kariko community in Kitumba Sub-County, Kabale district. She is among the many PIP innovators who received training in the participatory integrated planning (PIP) approach from the CommonGround project. Over the years, she has been grappling with the challenge of erosion due to the lack of trees and trenches in her bare plots of land, which has resulted in a decline in crop production (yields) and soil quality. She was no longer getting the same quantity of produce from her small plot as she used to do many years ago.

"From all my plots of land, I would get eight to ten bags of sorghum and 30 bags of potatoes. But now at most, I harvest less than four bags of sorghum and six bags of potatoes," she said. The decline in yields had significantly impacted her living conditions, causing her to struggle to pay for her children's school fees and feed the family.

Like Shabahurira, in Bukara community, Bunyangabu District, Kule was grappling with heavy water runoff and erosion during the rainy season, resulting in most of her gardens being bare without topsoil. "I did not have anyone to support me in controlling the

challenges of soil erosion and water runoff due to a lack of training," she said.

The heavy rains in Nyambigha community, Karugutu Sub-County, and Ntoroko district were also causing erosion and landslides in Jeremiah Kibatsi's cocoa plantations, leading to soil infertility and a rapid decline in cocoa production.

Another farmer, Hellen Natukunda from Kariko Community, Muko Sub-County Rubanda district, was grappling with heavy water runoffs and erosion during the rainy season, causing most of her gardens to be bare. According to Natukunda, she never had the skills to control the erosion challenges.

Rogers Mfitumukiza, the Farming Systems Expert for the CommonGround Project, says that when using the PIP approach, the emphasis is placed on the importance of collaboration between farmers and rural communities.

He added that through Module 1 of the PIP approach, various participatory sessions in communities are conducted with the aim of raising awareness about the various environmental issues and their effects on the quality of life in the community.

"Throughout the trainings, emphasis was put on activities related to soil restoration and conservation, because healthy soils are the foundation for success of all other agricultural activities," he explains.

Shabahurira was among those who received AGRITECH training from the project staff, and today she has adopted trenches and grass bands in all her plots of land. She revealed that after establishing the trenches, erosion in her garden has stopped, and her crops are looking better than before. Because of the awareness

meetings, Kibatsi realised that the only solution to managing erosion and water runoff was digging trenches on the cocoa farm. With the guidance from the project staff, he started integrating trenches into his plantation, and since then, water runoffs have reduced, and he has planted fruit trees on his land.

According to Natukunda, another PIP innovator who was grappling with the challenges of erosion due to the lack of trenches in her garden, during the various awareness meetings, they were trained in how to do things themselves without expecting any external support.

She decided to solve the problem that was affecting her garden, and that was erosion. "With support from other community members (PIP innovators), I started digging trenches in all my plots of land with guidance from the project field staff. And on each completed trench, I plant elephant grass along the way. I was taught that the grass will keep the soil from being eroded into the trench," she said.

Another PIP innovator from Bukara Community in Bunyangabu District, Wiliam Kasaija, was all full of praise for the CommonGround Project training. He revealed that he was taught how to use an A-frame to mark trenches, and it has aided him in digging standard trenches in each of his gardens. He explained that he is currently experiencing good outcomes, as water runoff, which was previously a significant issue, has been stopped.

He said, "At first, I did not think the training would be beneficial because so many projects had already begun and their methods had nothing to do with land restoration." However, after attending several AGRITECH trainings facilitated by CommonGround staff, I understood that the PIP approach is unique. It encourages people to work on their own and become good environmental stewards," he added.



COMMONGROUND COMMUNITIES ARE UTILISING LOCAL TOOLS TO OPEN COMMUNITY ACCESS ROADS.

After an hour's trek to Bufuma Hills on the slopes of Mt. Elgon in the Bududa District, we noticed a freshly opened, spacious, and immaculate road that appeared to have received substantial investment.

After a one-kilometre walk down the road, around forty individuals, young and elderly, male and female, emerged. They were using different tools, such as hoes, pangas, forked hoes, heavy-duty hammers, and more, to work on the road. Some other community members were busy moving soil and levelling the ground, while others were busy excavating rocks from the road with a large hammer.

It is at this time that we learnt that the community had collectively opened the entire community road, which we were enjoying, and that they planned to keep working on it until it was connected to the main access road to Bududa town.

One of the locals mentioned that his community's lack of good access roads has been causing problems. He said that the local authorities had informed them that opening roads would be challenging in their mountainous region. They were thus compelled to use their heads to carry the farm produce to the trading centres, from where they could get transportation to the markets.

Communities in Bugarama-Bwanjojo community, Buhara Sub-County, Kabale District, also faced challenges in accessing hospitals and other facilities as well as transportation of farm produce.

Because of the hilly nature of the area, the locals would carry their farm produce on their heads, and as for the sick and expecting women, they would use temporary stretchers as a means of transport to health facilities. According to a PIP innovator in Bugarama, Resty Benkunda, roads were like dreams to the community. They relied on footpaths, occasionally carved by animals, for transportation.

The situation was the same in Kariko community in Kitumba Sub-County Kabale District. The area is well known for producing potatoes. However, transporting harvested agricultural produce and inputs to and from the community was a challenge. One of the local leaders noted that, despite their letters to the sub-county authorities expressing their predicament over the absence of roads, they consistently received no feedback.

In Musandama community (Musandama 1, 2, and 3) in Nombe Sub-County in Ntoroko District, the absence of roads also presented difficulties in accessing main facilities like markets. Some residents claim that the Sub-County officials consistently claim that they lack the means to support road construction.

Rays of hope

In 2023, the CommonGround Project, implementing a participatory integrated planning approach, began to change people's mindset on rehabilitation of community access roads (community action) through a series of awareness meetings in various communities in the Elgon, Rwenzori, and Kigezi regions. The PIP Approach aims to promote resilience-based stewardship by fostering collaboration between farmers and communities through an interconnected set of activities. Prior to project involvement, there was either no road access or just limited road access in these communities.

Through the awareness meetings, the communities came up with community visions highlighting their current and desired situations. The major challenge the community faced was a lack of roads, and this was seen as what required immediate attention as per their visions. Following the many PIP trainings conducted in the communities, they realised that they could solve their own problems without waiting on the government, especially the opening of roads.

During one of the awareness sessions, a PIP inventor disclosed that they came to the realisation that they were wasting time waiting for government assistance. He added that as part of the awareness process, they developed a SWOT analysis in which they determined their strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Following this, they came to the realisation that they

were the ones who caused many of the problems they were facing and that they also had the solutions. According to a resident of the Itojo community in Ntoroko, they chose leaders from among themselves to make sure that everyone participates in the group activities related to the road opening. Communities made the decision to begin opening roads right away. To begin, the communities mobilised the tools that were readily available to them (such as hoes, pangas, spades, and forked howes).

Bwambale Wilson Kitembo of the Musandama community has been actively gathering community members to take part in the efforts to open a 7-kilometre road that connects Bundibugyo-Fort Portal Road to Musandama 1 and 2 communities in Nombe sub-county Ntoroko District.

Kitembo claims that the community has been lacking an access road for many years, making it impossible for cars or boda boda to enter the community. They carried their goods on their heads, which constrained movement. However, with the roads in the community, transportation has become easy.

In Kiboota Kateebwa, which is a new community, in Kateebwa Subcounty Bunyangabu District, the community opened a community road that serves four zones, including Kiboota, Kateebwa 1, Karugaya, and Bunyamwagi. They were carrying all their produce on their heads and then used small walkways to reach the main road, which was a long distance from the community, hence tiresome. But now, with the road, movement has become easy.

Diana Kasemiire, the Community Development Officer for Kibiito Sub-County in Bunyangabu District, says that before the CG project, communities were not doing community work; instead, they expected everything from the government. "To open a community road or maintain those available using local available tools was considered the role of government. However, after the awareness meetings, they now know that they also have a responsibility to do community work without having to wait for government," she said.

She further added that the main government responsibility is to open or maintain community roads; however, with meagre resources, it becomes difficult. But now that the communities are empowered to use locally accessible means, it supplements the government efforts. "Communities now understand, nevertheless, that they too have an obligation to carry out community service without waiting on the government, thanks to the awareness sessions," she noted.

David Muhereza, LCIII Chairperson for Kitumba Sub-County in Kabale District, said the awareness meetings were long overdue, stating that the reason certain communities lacked access roads was because they were waiting for external intervention. He further clarified that the limited resources available to them

as a sub-county prevented them from opening roads, which is one of the problems preventing highland residents' access to markets and other amenities.

"We are, however, pleased that, because of the CommonGround awareness-raising efforts, communities have begun to open roads on their own with manual labour. We think that communities will have a different Kitumba if they continue with this attitude," stated Muhereza.

Stephen Ampeire Kasyaba, the LC5 chairperson for Rubanda District, praised the work that CommonGround has done so far and mentioned how the awareness sessions have truly helped people see things differently and broaden their perspectives. Given the quick impact the initiative has had on the communities, he stated that they have great faith in it. As a result, he requested that the communities support the initiative and work with its implementers.

As of right now, the Kigezi communities have opened more than 19 kilometres, Rwenzori 17 kilometres, and Elgon 9 kilometres, thanks to the community initiatives. Everyone in the community, be it women, young people, or the elderly, has embraced community action to ensure that the roads are opened, linking their communities to different social services.



COMMUNITIES START ESTABLISHING TREE NURSERY BEDS TO ADDRESS CLIMATE CHANGE EFFECTS.

Uganda is susceptible to the effects of climate change. Climate change due to global warming is a function of anthropogenic factors, with the main driver in Uganda being land use change.

The impacts include changes in rainfall patterns and variability in temperatures, thus increasing pests and diseases, flooding, and landslides in parts of the country. The overall consequence is increasing poverty, famine, and food insecurity.

Degradation of the catchment areas has increased due to numerous human activities, which include human settlements, agriculture, and gravity flow water schemes, thus affecting the functionality of the ecosystems. It is important to note that 41% of Uganda's total area is experiencing degradation, and 12% is in a severe state of degradation (CIAT et al., 2017).

To mitigate these challenges, the CommonGround Project under Pathway 2 has started supporting communities with skills on how to establish tree nursery beds to address the effects of climate change.

The aim is to have a central area in each community where seedlings of various indigenous tree species are raised to a desirable size for planting both at the restoration sites and in the community at large. The tree nurseries will be owned and managed by the community, and the aim is sustainability.

The training happened in all the project areas of implementation, and the communities were trained by the experienced staff in tree nursery bed making and management.

Some of the skills gained by the farmers include nursery bed establishment, terrace making if the selected site is not flat, how to erect the shade, which acts as a windbreaker but also for a shed, how to fence the nursery area, soil collection and preparation, tree nursery design, watering, soil mixtures, seed bed preparation, and potting.

They were also trained in seed handling, tree seed sources, seed pre-treatment, seed sowing, pricking out, shading, watering, weeding, root pruning, hardening off, seedling protection, and fungal disease prevention.

In Kyatwa community, Kibiito town council in Bunyangabu District, the community members were excited about the nursery bed, explaining that they had wanted to plant trees but faced challenges accessing the right seedlings. They revealed that with the skills they have acquired, they are going to ensure they properly manage the nursery beds so that they gain from it.

Kaguma Community, located in Buheesi Town Council and Ntabago A and B communities, were also happy about the skills they acquired in nursery bed management. They promised to work collaboratively so that they could benefit from the nursery bed.

Kagano community and Muko sub-county Rubanda District promised to use the nursery bed to restore their degraded hills. They, however, revealed that the community lacks water, something that could affect the management of the nursery bed.

Besides training, the communities were supported with assorted materials to aid the tree nursery establishment. These included shade nets, wire mesh for fencing the nursery beds, wheelbarrows, watering cans, spades, and seeds, among others.

In the Elgon region, 38 community tree sites under the old communities were validated through observation, a transact walk, and administering a questionnaire. The findings were that most of the tree seedlings produced were fodder trees, although few were still in existence.



IMPROVED FARMING GIVES KASAIJA HOPE FOR INCREASED INCOME.

William Kasaija is a PIP innovator from Bukara, a community in the Bunyangabu district, who was practicing subsistence farming, which was the norm from generation to generation.

For example, he revealed that they could leave as many suckers as the banana could bear, and they could leave as many stems and branches as the coffee could yield.

According to him, coffee had little value because the beans were always tiny and light, despite their belief that the more stems or branches a coffee could have, the more berries could be harvested.

The locals had the belief that when it came to bananas, the more suckers you left on the plant, the more bunches you would receive. However, the CommonGround Project started being implemented in Bukara subcounty in July

2023, and the community began receiving training in good agronomic practices.

The community was taught how to de-sucker and prune bananas if they wanted the bunches to increase in size. "I was initially opposed to it since I believed that it would destroy my plantation. But I decided to give it a shot after attending multiple AGRITECH trainings, and now I can see a change in my bananas. The sizes are starting to get bigger," he revealed.

He was also advised to stamp the old coffee and trim the bushy coffee. Today, he is filled with joy because the pruned coffee is revitalising and the berries' size has increased. He also decided to stamp half of the coffee plantation, and it has started rejuvenating again.

Kasaija says that during the first season of 2024, he was able to harvest at least eight basins of coffee cherries from his coffee plantation, compared to the previous year, when he only managed to harvest three basins. This has given him hope that incomes are going to increase.

He has also planted half an acre of onions, which he says he expects to cost over five million shillings.

"I was advised by the CommonGround staff to plant improved and quality seed, which I did, and by the look of things, I am going to get money. This season, I used organic fertiliser, and I see my crops are doing better than the inorganic one, which was even more expensive," he revealed.

Kasaija applauds the PIP approach, which empowers communities to draw household plans, which he says is what guides him daily. He also said the IPP has also guided him to have a well-integrated and organised garden, which is new to his community.



LOWER LOCAL GOVERNMENT VISION COMMITTEES DRAW THEIR CURRENT AND DESIRED FUTURE SITUATIONS

The drawing of subcounty current and future situation maps for lower local governments in Rwenzori and Kigezi regions was successfully completed.

The aim was to have a common and better understanding of PIP, especially for the leadership who are mandated to offer services to the communities. Prior to conducting the drawing exercise, the CG team held a two-day meeting to guide the vision committees and drew the LLG PIPS at agreed venues, which were the subcounty/town council headquarters and other locations that were deemed fit.

After, there was validation of the political boundaries by the Sub County Vision Committee in relation to how they know their sub-county political boundaries.

The committee members were split into two groups, one to draw and complete the current situation and the other to draw the vision maps per subcounty.

A list of problems was identified in the awareness meetings, which provided information for the drawing of the current situation map.

A list of aspirations from the awareness meetings was also provided to inform the drawing of the vision map. The action plans were also developed and documented during the already accomplished lower

local government work meetings/workshops.

After, the vision committees presented the current and desired future situation maps as drawn in the first visioning meetings. The draft maps (current situation and desired future situation maps) were discussed, and input/suggestions made.

The committee members then went back to their initial groups and refined the drawings and made sure they incorporated all that was suggested by the participants. They later presented the refined maps, which were then adopted by the subcounties/town councils for further action.

The subcounty leadership was advised to intrinsically be motivated to carry on the activities of the action plan as stipulated by themselves and should not be pushed by the project.

Thirty-two workshops (2 per subcounty/town council) were successfully conducted and accomplished in all 16 subcounty/town councils of the Rwenzori and Kigezi subregions.



MONITORING VISITS FOR IPPS ENHANCED THE CAPACITY OF PIP INNOVATORS.

Land management is a very important pillar of the PIP approach. All stages of the PIP approach implementation must address environmental problems, particularly land degradation in the form of soil erosion and nutrient losses, as they pose serious impediments to agricultural productivity and sustainable development in general.

In November 2023, CommonGround Project enhanced the capacity of PIP innovators (PIs) to create integrated plot plans (IPPs). An integrated plot plan is a plan for a dedicated plot of land by a PI/farmer. It integrates various practices addressing soil erosion, soil fertility, and crop management, allowing the farmer to learn what works best.

Following the creation of IPPs, project staff further built the capacity of PIP innovators in integrated crop and land management practices. These efforts were based on five key principles: capturing water where it falls, increasing organic matter in the soil, supporting soil life, restoring nutrient balance, and optimising farming efficiency and sustainability.

Subsequently, project staff provided training and guidance to farmers on various integrated crop and land management practices within their communities. These trainings focused on best practices, resulting in PIP innovators beginning to implement some of the practices they were taught. It has been eight months since the creation of IPPs with PIs started with both training and implementation.

To assess their effectiveness in implementing the IPPs, recently CommonGround project staff, the community, and local government officials participated in the participatory monitoring and learning visits to the five best IPPs per community in the Rwenzori and Kigezi regions.

These visits aimed to further enhance the capacity of PIP innovators and reinforce their understanding of best practices, but also for others to learn from what fellow colleagues have implemented right and the mistakes they have made so that they can improve. According to Rogers Mfitumukiza, the framing systems expert for the project, by providing hands-on learning experiences and peer-to-peer interactions, PIP innovators were empowered to effectively implement integrated crop and land management practices on their IPPs.

He added that the learning visits activity helped to assess which practices are being implemented, identify challenges and opportunities, and encourage PIs who have not implemented much to adopt suitable practices. During the visit, the host PI farmer explained what practices they had done, why they did them (highest of the 5 principles), and how they were able to implement these practices.

The PIs shared their challenges and key learnings from the implementation of IPP. The entire process was interactive, and field demonstrations provided hands-on learning experiences.

This in addition involved a question-and-answer session by the visiting PIs to the host farmer and experience sharing with fellow activity participants. Participants also engaged in feedback discussions to share experiences and insights gained from the learning visit.

What was discovered from the monitoring

All the PIP innovators we visited had established different crops and farm activities. Some had at least one cash crop, especially in Rwenzori, had vegetable gardens for improved nutrition, and they also had crops that were sufficiently productive.

They had also applied some integrated set of sustainable land and crop management practices on their land to be able to cope with environmental shocks and improve soil fertility and to reduce land degradation and control erosion, especially on steeper slopes where high runoff during intensive rainfall is an imminent threat.

They, however, requested more training in good agronomic practices so that they could perfect their activities.

MY EXPERIENCE DURING DATA COLLECTION IN THE ELGON REGION UNDER THE COMMONGROUND PROJECT

Hello readers, my name is Inge de Willigen, a student from Wageningen University of Research in the Netherlands. I spent four months at the CommonGround Project regional office in Elgon to collect data in Bududa district for my Msc. thesis research.

I am a student from Wageningen, where I study International Land and Water Management with a specialisation in Sustainable Land Management. As a student, I became highly interested in the PIP approach many years ago after interacting with staff who were implementing it.

Now, I was finally able to see it in practice, and I am thankful that the CG team facilitated my research, took me along, and showed me the work they do. Living in Uganda has been an interesting experience, although I must say I had a bit of a tough start. At the same time as I was trying to get used to the people, climate, culture, language, and landscapes, I had some trouble with housing.

But as things got arranged and I was slowly settling in, I discovered the beauty of the country and the hospitality of its people. I really enjoyed discovering the way people communicate, the culture, the landscapes, and the habits, and I tried to adopt all of them.

I went along to awareness-raising meetings and restoration site selections; I organised workshops with the team to make their knowledge mine; I spoke to many farmers; I started collaborating with my translator; and I tried to learn a little bit of Lumasaba. Eventually, I knew my way around the villages, could greet the people in their own local language, even got my own local name (Namataka), and was able to collect the data I needed.

In the last weeks of my stay, we went to Bududa almost every day, and really, there was never a dull moment. Fieldwork in Bududa comes with its challenges: a car that broke down, trying to hike the slippery, muddy, steep slopes without covering myself in mud, and

farmers who, at the end of an interview, Farmers that are nowhere to be found because they moved to Kenya, learning the hard way that when a farmer tells you, "It is just 10 minutes away," it can be anywhere between 10 minutes and 4 hours of walking; and so on.

At the same time, it was a wonderful experience that made me learn and develop myself a lot within a short period, and I truly enjoyed every single Bududa day. I think it is so beautiful how the farmers opened to me, explained many personal things, always took time for me, and showed me the way they manage their farmlands.

So, to make my story complete, I did research into sustainable land management within the farmland of Bududa farmers.

I am interested in the way farmers manage their land, the practices they do to manage it sustainably, the reasons behind their actions, and how this relates to the goals of MWARES and CommonGround.

So, I visited farmers in the MWARES subcounties and talked with them about their land management, visited their farmland, and did an investigation of the SLUM practices they do. Then I did the same in the subcounties where CommonGround is now starting, which served as a control group. All these findings I took home, where I am now back at Wageningen University trying to organise my data and will start analysing soon.

PARTICIPATORY SELECTION AND PRIORITISATION OF KEY COMMODITIES AND GENERAL MARKET ACCESS BOTTLENECKS WERE HELD.

Workshops on Participatory Selection and Prioritisation of Key Commodities and General Market Access Bottlenecks were held in all project areas of implementation.

During the workshops, five key general market access bottlenecks and key commodities were identified per region, discussed practical options for actions to remove the bottlenecks, mapped relevant actors, and laid the foundation for MOUs for co-investment with respective communities, sub-counties, and districts.

The activities were for three days per district and two days at the sub-county level for collective input from communities and sub-counties.

Participants from the subcounties included political leaders (Chairperson LC3 and Parish Councillors/Chiefs), technical staff (Senior Assistant Secretary, Community Development, Agricultural and Veterinary Officers), and Community Vision Committee members (2 per community). These were drawn from the project sub-counties and communities.

A 1-day wrap-up workshop was held to consolidate the output of sub-county workshops but also the input of the district political and technical leaders. This workshop drew representatives from CVC, LC3 Chairpersons, SAS, and Agricultural Officers; RDCs, LCV Chairpersons, CAOs, DPMO, District Commercial, Veterinary, Agricultural, and Community Development Officers.

Others included private sector actors, cooperatives, SACCOs, local value chain traders, local seed producers, government parastatals like NARO and EKN-funded projects, etc. This participatory selection, prioritisation, and triangulation with key stakeholders at both community and local governments was in building consensus, a recipe for ownership and sustainability of the project and community endeavours.

General market access bottlenecks

Kigezi: poor road infrastructure, long distances to access financial services, lack of appropriate financial products and services, market information systems, and appropriate storage facilities.

Rwenzori: poor road infrastructure, absence of markets in the vicinity, limited access to finance, weak and disorganised groups, and price fluctuations.

Roads

For each bottleneck, effects, community and local government contributions towards their removal, and practical options for actions are discussed at length. The most important bottleneck is the road infrastructure.

The detailed road inventory of the prioritised road per community was taken with emphasis on practical and realistic actions for co-investment by the community, local governments, and CG.

An overview of the MOU template was given, focussing on the possible contributions of each party ranging from finance, material, byelaws, lobbying, human resources, machinery, and equipment, among others.

Key commodities

The following were the prioritised key commodities per region.

Elgon: bananas, coffee, cattle (dairy and beef-bull fattening), onions, and poultry (chicken).

Kigezi: potatoes, climbing (beans), cabbage, sorghum, passion fruits, onions, and sweet potatoes

Rwenzori: coffee, maize, bananas, potatoes, cassava, cocoa, and beans.

For each value chain, node-specific challenges, practical options for development (including opportunities), and actors for collaboration were identified and discussed.

Community PIP as a lobbying tool During the district workshops, some communities presented their community PIPs to the plenary as a lobbying tool with emphasis on the aspirations of economic importance.

As a result, some district authorities made pledges for collaboration to alleviate the bottlenecks.

General market access challenges

Follow-up engagements will be made with the mapped actors for practical implementation of the measures to remove the bottlenecks and harness the opportunities.

PATRONS AND HEAD TEACHERS UNDERGO REVIEW OF THE PIP APPROACH IN SCHOOLS



Patrons and head teachers in the Rwenzori region have received training in the PIP approach and the use of the environmental education (EE) guide. Under CommonGround, EE strives to motivate learners to become stewards of their school environment.

The training aimed to equip Environmental Club patrons with the knowledge to effectively implement environmental education in schools using the PIP approach.

Environmental education in schools encourages learners to investigate environmental issues, engage in problem-solving, and take sustainable actions to improve the environment.

Using the PIP approach, a group of motivated learners come up with a vision for a better school and plan to work together in an environmental club to achieve the desired school by using the environment sustainably.

Patrons participated in various activities, including developing their schools' current and desired situations, conducting a SWOT analysis, and developing action plans to implement activities based on their visions.



PROFILING VSLAS AND PRIORITIZATION OF ENTREPRENEURIAL INITIATIVES

Pathway three profiles Village Savings and Loans Associations (VSLAs) and group entrepreneurial initiatives in project communities.

The purpose of the activity was to identify the various groups that exist in the communities of operation in preparation. This would also help to schedule different group contact persons at their convenience for other forthcoming activities.

The mapping activity was conducted through village assemblies targeting all community members, while profiling was done through meetings with at least 2 contact persons per group.

A total of 664 VSLAs were profiled in the three regions: 286 in Elgon, 277 in Kigezi, and 101 in Rwenzori. Starting VSLAs is motivated by the members' need to eradicate poverty through access to credit for education, agricultural production, and other household needs. Additionally, social and emergency needs are met through the social funds and solidarity groups.

Among the profiles were ROSCAs, where members pool money for a member on a regular, rotational basis. Kigezi has the most cooperator spirit, which, unlike Elgon and Rwenzori, most VSLAs are built on social insurance. Whereas these groups have savings, it was hard to track due to improper documentation and the fact that they only declare the balance as at the end of the cycle and not all the monies paid out or spent throughout the period.

These groups had potential, and their SACCOs can be improved if the social insurance is integrated with saving for entrepreneurship and investment and capacitation in good record-keeping.

156 group entrepreneurial initiatives were profiled, with 76 in Elgon, 71 in Kigezi, and 9 in Rwenzori. These included both agriculturally related and non-agricultural enterprises, both existing initiatives and mere ideas.

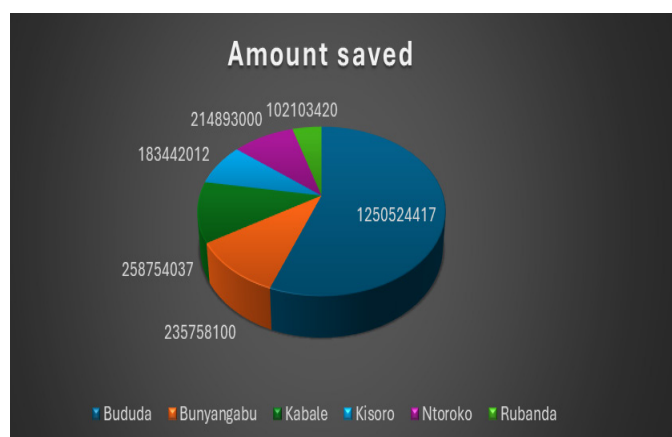
These are aimed at income diversification but also reduce pressure and dependence on the limited land in the highlands.

Disaggregated by district, VSLA membership in Bududa consisted of 5481 females, Kabale 3517, Rubanda 1281, Bunyangabu 1041, Kisoro 924, and 918 in Ntoroko district. Overall, VSLAs are dominated by women, except for Kisoro, where the margin is small.

This can be explained by the fact that men, unlike women, often engage in endeavours that require bigger sums of money, which VSLAs can hardly meet. The takeaway here therefore is that VSLAs are key vehicles through which women can be empowered and reach out to.

The 664 VSLAs profiled reported to have saved a total of Shs2.25 billion as of the end of the last cycle.

In Bududa, the 286 VSLAs saved 1.25 billion, Kabale 259 million, Bunyangabu 236 million, Ntoroko 215 million, Kisoro 183 million, and Rubanda 102 million. It is remarkable the amount of money in these largely informal groups and the huge potential for transformation of communities if well managed.



The project will collaborate with relevant actors to invest in and strengthen VSLAs as a vehicle for financial inclusion, transformation, and access for women and youth and achievement of the project goal.

EKN-FUNDED PROJECTS IN UGANDA CONDUCT A PEER REVIEWS MONITORING IN ELGON



The Embassy of the Netherlands in Uganda funded projects in Elgon and participated in the peer review monitoring of progress, outcomes, and intervention impact.

The team was led by the EKN staff and senior management teams from CommonGround Project, which is implemented by ISSD Uganda and Wageningen University & Research, and other projects implemented by Cordaid, IFDC, SNV, and TechnoServe.

The peer monitoring process aimed at exchanging, interacting, and fostering joint reflection between the five EKN-funded food security and agricultural development projects.



During the PM process, partners were invited to learn from each other, benefit from each other's experiences and practices, and explore enhanced implementation through joint planning and the development of strategies.

During the field visit, partners had the opportunity to see the project practices and engage with farmers and stakeholders in the projects implemented by different organisations. The field visit focused on PIP, market development, and collaboration with local government. In Bududa, where the CommonGround project is being implemented, the team visited PIP innovators who have implemented the PIP approach and a school that is also implementing PIP to learn how the approach works.

First, the team visited Mukute, one of the PIP innovators who had implemented PIP, and he presented his PIPs to the team before leading them to the garden. On his PIP, most of the activities he had planned to do were worked on apart from the house, and he said that he was still saving enough money.

Some of the activities on his PIP were: buying two cows; building a modern structure for the cows; establishing a kitchen garden; establishing trenches in all his gardens; planting grass along all the trenches; and planting Calliandra along the border of his garden. Other aspirations included planting a new banana and coffee plantation, taking his children to good schools, stopping drinking alcohol, building a modern house with versatile iron sheets, and stopping domestic violence in his home.

The team managed to visit all the activities planned, and all were in place as planned, apart from the modern house, for which he said that he was still saving

money.

To prove that domestic violence was no longer in the home and that there were no longer issues of drunkenness, the team decided to interview the wife in Mukute's absence. She attested that her husband stopped drinking alcohol in 2022, and since then, he is now a peaceful man in the home.

She also said that because of the improved farming, the yields have increased, which has also increased the financial cash flow, enabling many to pay school fees for their children.

Josephat Byaruhanga from the Embassy said he was impressed that the project has improved the lives of the communities. He advised them to continue implementing those activities, keeping in mind that they are the ones who benefit.

He asked the farmers what was unique about the project, and they revealed that it gives them the opportunity to solve their problems without having to wait for external support. They also said that the project encourages collaboration, which is a big part of what has helped them solve many problems, like road openings, easily as a community.

School visit

In the afternoon, the PM team visited Bumasata Primary School, supported by the CommonGround project, to implement the PIP approach through the environmental club, and they interacted with the school patron and the environmental club members. Through the club, the school had put in place water drainage channels, made walkways in the school compound, and planted flower beds in front of the classrooms.

The club members had also established a school demo garden along the fence with matooke and maize intercropped with vegetables, planted a live fence along the school that will help reduce trespassing, improved sanitation with hand washing points, and learners had gained knowledge on agronomy and environmental conservation that is being practiced in their homes.

Later, they also visited Bududa district stakeholders who have actively participated in the implementation of the MWARES project and now the CommonGround project to discuss their contribution and the lessons learnt during the implementation.



BENKUNDA'S INTEGRATED PLOT PLAN (IPP) HAS BEGUN TO GENERATE REVENUE.



Deep in Bugarama Community, Buhara Subcounty, Kabale District, Benkunda Resty is a PIP innovator. She has been practicing farming for many years, but according to her, the harvests have never been good. This is because she was practicing farming in a rudimentary way. She would plant different crops on the same plot, but in a disorganised way. Which made her harvest less, hence the low incomes.

However, in 2023, the CommonGround project was rolled out in the community, so she was able to learn about good farming practices.

"We were trained on the Integrated Plot Plan (IPP), which involves a combination of different agricultural activities on the same plot of land. We also learn the benefits of using quality seed," she says.

After the training, Benkunda immediately started preparing her plot of land. She put up trenches to control the runoff and divided the plot into different portions.

She has eight portions on the piece of land, which is equivalent to half an acre. Each portion had a different crop. One portion has cabbages, another spinach, another eggplant, another sweet potato, then pumpkins and onions, among others.

According to her, she has started realising better yields from her IPP. She has started harvesting spinach, which she eats at home, but the excess she sells to the community.

"On a good day, I can make sh10,000, depending on the demand for the vegetables. During the first season, I

harvested cabbages, and I got some good money, which I used to buy a goat and a cow," she said. She stressed that they do everything as a family, which has eased the labour at home. According to her, they were trained by the project staff on issues of collaboration, which she feels has been a big part of her success.



ISHOZA'S MINDSET TOWARD IMPROVED FARMING WAS CHANGED AFTER ATTENDING IPP TRAININGS.



Patrick Ishoza is a resident of the Kyatwa community in Kibiito town council, Bunyangabu District. He is a farmer whose mindset was changed after he attended various awareness-raising meetings and Integrated Plot Plans (IPPs) trainings conducted by the CommonGround project.

Prior to the trainings, Ishoza was engaged in rudimentary farming. He has a banana plantation, but he never knew how to take care of it. He believed that de-suckering bananas would put in the loss as the harvests would be low.

"Tradability: we believed that when you leave so many suckers on the banana, you would harvest more bananas. Even pruning was believed to drain the bananas. However, the sizes were always small, hence fetching less money. A bunch would go for Sh5, 000 and below, which I believe kept us in poverty," he revealed. But through the various trainings on good agronomic practices, such as banana desuckering, pruning, and weeding, among others, things have started improving, though it was not easy to adapt to the changes immediately.

"I felt like I was going to destroy my bananas. Imagine leaving only two suckers; it was really very hard for me. However, I was advised to first de-sucker on half of the plantation, and if the results are good, then I could work on the remaining half," he said.

He adds that in just six months he saw a change in the garden he had worked on, so he decided to de-sucker the entire plantation.

Ishoza, who has two acres of bananas, used to get Shs180, 000 per month, and this was because the size of the bunches was small. The situation has since changed. He now gets Shs380, 000 from the bananas per month after removing expenses, and this is because the sizes have started increasing.

"It is now one year, and I see things improving. I have hope that as time goes by and with more training and implementation, the sizes are going to increase, hence more income," he revealed.

Trenching

Ishoza also used to suffer from erosion during the rainy seasons. This is because his land is gently sloping. The project also trained communities on sustainable land management practices (SLUM), and Ishoza was among those who benefitted.

He was trained to dig trenches using an A-frame, which he put into practice with the help of the project staff. His entire plantation is now covered with trenches. Along the trenches, he has planted Napier and elephant grass to stabilise the soils.

Since he does not have animals to provide him with manure to add to the gardens. He uses his grasses in exchange for manure.

"My neighbours have animals but do not have animal feeds. So, since the grasses I planted to stabilise the trenches have grown, I decided to have an agreement with them, so I always exchange grass for manure. This has worked for me, and now my plantation has improved," he explains.

Sugarcane

During the training, they were advised that they should have variety crops to get more money. He had an idle piece of land.

So, he decided to plant sugarcane, and today he has started selling. In a day he sells for Shs10,000; the money he uses to supplement the money he gets from the sale of bananas, so he pays school fees and buys scholastic materials for his children and takes care of other needs.

Piggery

After incomes increased, Ishoza decided to introduce piggery. He had saved Shs650, 000 in a village SACCO, so he withdrawn it and bought building materials for a pigsty. After construction, he decided that every week he will buy a piglet using money from the sale of bananas.

"I made sure that when I sell bananas and sugarcane, I save at least Shs20,000. So, every Saturday I would buy a piglet of Shs100,000 for four weeks. Now I have four piglets, and my plan is to rear them until they give birth so I can increase the sty," he said.

The next savings are going to be for establishing a rabbit business. Ishoza wants to construct a rabbit house from where he wants to rear 11 rabbits for the start. His plan is to start this venture at the end of the year after completing the payment of school fees for his children.



EDITH'S DREAM IS TO BECOME A MODAL FARMER IN KIBIITO SUBCOUNTY



In Ntabago A, Kibiito subcounty, Bunyangabu district, Edith Kabanyaka is beating all odds to become a role model for farmers in her community.

Like many rural smallholder farmers who face enormous challenges, including limited technology, poor seed varieties, a lack of extension services, and high input costs, among others, Edith was not different. She was faced with a challenge of low soil fertility, limited land availability, and reliance on rain-fed systems, among others.

She had no idea that mulching would keep soil moisture in her gardens and promote fertility; she also did not know that because her garden lacked trenches, it was the cause of frequent erosion.

But in 2023, her community saw the introduction of the CommonGround, whose main core strategy is the Participatory Integrated Planning (PIP) Approach. Edith was one of the fortunate farmers chosen to participate in the many PIP trainings, and as a result, she is now a PIP innovator under the project.

The PIP approach aims to increase farmers' motivation, their resilience, and their stewardship, and it underlies all activities at the household and community level. Key elements of it are also used during workshops with entrepreneurial groups, government stakeholders, and watershed management committees.

According to Edith, although a lot of initiatives had been introduced by previous projects, they had no effect on the communities. She disclosed that they operated on top-down approaches, meaning that all their initiatives were pushed upon them; as a result, their engagement was rather low, hence not lasting after the projects closed.

"All we would get are incentives such as seedlings and tools like hoes, among other things. The projects would just presume what we needed without giving us the opportunity to express what we needed. The community would return to its previous states following the completion of the projects," she explained.

Noting that with CommonGround, on the other hand, they began by mobilising communities and asking them to identify their own problems and show how they could offer solutions themselves.

In addition, they presented their SWOT analysis, which allowed them to evaluate their current strengths and weaknesses and create a winning long-term plan. Following that, each household was urged to sketch their present and desired plans as well as their action plans.

"As smallholder farmers, we rarely had the opportunity to plan and create our household plans, which made PIP exceptional. We operated based on how we had woken up, and I think that is what had kept us in poverty," Edith remarked.

However, through the PIP trainings, Edith was able to recognise the challenges that affected her small farm, including erosion and poor agronomic methods.

She began engaging with the project field staff right away, and they taught her the correct techniques for mulching, desuckering, and trench digging.

"My gardening improved after I started putting ideas into reality. The size of the bananas has begun to grow, and even the gardens seem more organised and well-kept. I also received training in cultivating vegetables, which I have started. I no longer buy vegetables for my family," Edith revealed.

Although she has not begun harvesting in big batches, she thinks she will make more money because of the size of the banana bunches.

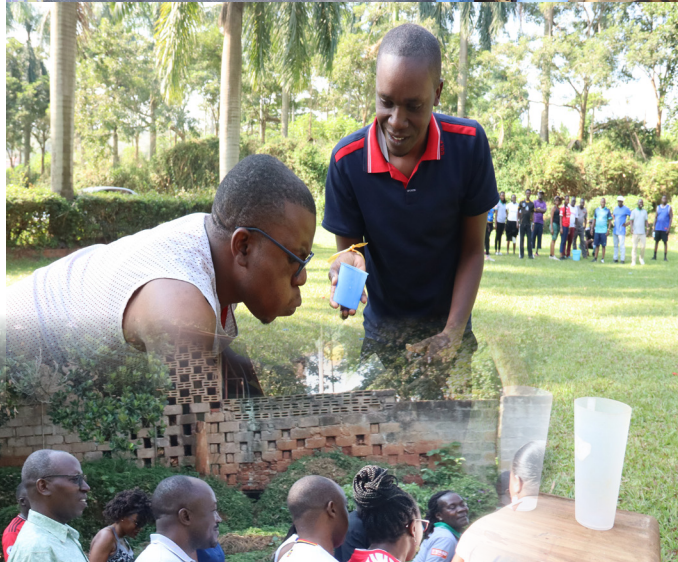
In addition to gardening, Edith has expanded her little chicken farm using the money she receives from the sale of the extra vegetables and other crops. She currently has 200 layers, and she believes they will give her additional revenue as well as manure for her vegetable garden and plantation.

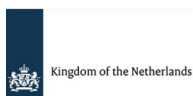
"Because of the CommonGround project's unique approach to PIP, I think the communities where it is being implemented are going to be transformed," she said.



TEAM BUILDING IN JINJA WAS FILLED WITH FUN







Kingdom of the Netherlands



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