



## HORTICULTURE IN MAKUENI: A SLEEPING GIANT AWAKES

### FRUIT FARMERS CATAPULTED INTO FORTUNE AFTER BEING EQUIPPED WITH INVALUABLE SKILLS BY NALEP AND SNV NETHERLANDS

**T**he success story of Israel as a major global producer of horticultural products is well documented. Though located in a desert and with hardly any rainfall years in, years out, the tiny country which is infamous for her never ending wars with the neighbours has excelled in farming (mainly horticulture) because of being innovative and investing in skills development.

Israel has embraced irrigation and other cutting edge farming techniques to produce citrus fruits in tonnes which ironically are exported to countries which are better endowed with rainfall and soils than her. There is a major lesson that other countries

(Kenya included) can learn from Israel. A highly skilled human resource is a major factor to the success of agriculture, just like it is in information communication technology (ICT), finance, education and other key sectors which propel the wheel of the global economy.

It is a lesson that farmers in Nzau district (Makueni County) have recently taken seriously and the results are evident in the area. Though the local rainfall distribution pattern is poor, the soil and climatic conditions are ideal for horticulture, but for a very long time, the said farmers were sitting on a goldmine as it were.

They were not fully exploiting this free gift from mother nature. Today, after acquiring the necessary skills and knowledge in fruits production, the mango has become their cash cow and not merely a part of their diet. They have the strong collaboration between NALEP and SNV Netherlands to thank for this.

#### How the journey started

In 2008, NALEP organized a stakeholder forum for farmers in the district. According to the chairman of Nzau District Stakeholder Forum, Mr. Johnes Waema, during this forum it was found out that the residents of this area were mainly small scale citrus fruits farmers and their major cash crop was mango. Nevertheless their standards of



**Mr. and Mrs. Johnes Waema in their orchard.**

living were low because they were making heavy post harvest losses. In addition, they were very few government extension officers in the area and consequently the farmers did not have anyone to train them on modern farming techniques. Moreover, the farmers lacked unity and their lone ranger tactics exposed them to a lot of exploitation from the middlemen purchasing their produce. In the same regard, it was found out that men were not keen on working in the farms and they would spend most of their time in the shopping centres discussing politics or taking alcohol. This slowed down the pace of development in the area, leading to high levels of poverty.

Against this background, various common interest groups (CIGs) were formed in the area (among them the Nzau CIG) to address these pressing needs by uniting the people and enabling them to have a strong voice in driving their agenda.

### Collaboration with SNV Netherlands

A critical step towards facilitating the local farmers meet their objectives was the partnership between NALEP and SNV Netherlands. According to Alphonse Muriu, senior adviser, economic development, SNV Netherlands, the partnership was informed by the need to make the players from the private sector active participants in establishing a vibrant agribusiness sector in the country. It commenced in April 2010 with the aim of commercializing small holder farming and providing respective farmers with market

linkages among other interventions. Several areas in the country's arid and semi arid regions were chosen as centres of excellence and Makueni was one of them. The objective was to ultimately replicate and upscale this model in other parts of the said regions.

In Makueni County, research indicated that the major economic activity was citrus fruits farming. Mangoes were identified as the flagship fruits. In this regard, a value chain analysis was done on mangoes in respect on how to improve their quality and volumes so as to have a viable enterprise which would effectively engage the market. To start with, exchange visits were organized for the farmers so that they could learn first-hand from their successful counterparts in other parts of the country engaged in fruits farming.

This was followed by the establishment of collection centres to enable buyers and sellers meet in big numbers. Consequently, the average prices for their produce improved by 30%. To provide market linkages, the farmers were facilitated to attend a forum at the Kenya Agricultural Research Institute (KARI) centre in Thika. In this forum, key players in the mangoes value chain among them processors, exporters and retail outlets interacted with the farmers and business to business contacts were made.

Before the intervention, farmers were making

heavy post harvest losses. "A lot of fruits were going to waste during the harvesting season because of their poor quality, wrong variety as well as poor handling techniques," says Mr. Muriu. In this regard, a group of 70 young and educated individuals from the area were trained on farm care and management, entrepreneurship, marketing and market linkages as well as nursery establishment by officers from KARI in partnership with NALEP and SNV Netherlands. In turn, they would extend their services to the farmers at a competitive fee so as to equip them with the necessary skills and knowledge on how to improve on the production of fruits and make more money in their enterprises. Ultimately, these service providers would complement the effort of the local government extension officers.

According to Anthony Mutua Kimeu ( a local service provider and the chairman of Nzau Farm Produce Enterprises), members of his team train the farmers on how to control pests, spray and graft plants, establish orchards , prune the fruit trees and map terraces among other areas. In addition, they link them with markets for their produce and they advise them on how to keep records. Moreover, they provide the farmers with high yielding certified seeds which are resistant to drought. They mainly focus on fruits and vegetables like mangoes, oranges, cabbages and tomatoes.



**Anthony Kimeu, chairman, Nzau Farm Produce Enterprises.**

To address the problem of drought, the farmers are taught how to use drift irrigation. The service providers not only assist them to buy the necessary and appropriate irrigation kits, but they also guide them on the installation process.



using drip irrigation to grow cabbages.

"Some farmers are unable to buy the pesticides that we recommend to them and this compromises the quality and quantity of their produce," laments Mutua. "In the same breath, the local road network is poor and hence transporting goods to the market is a big obstacle," he adds.

### A beneficiary

Peter Wambua is a member of the Nzai CIG and a beneficiary of the extension services.



**Peter Wambua, a farmer who has benefited from the service providers.**

The small scale farmer grows maize, beans, cow peas, cassavas, green grams and mangoes in his three and a half acres farm. Mangoes and cassavas are his major cash crops.

Before engaging the service providers, he only had a few mango trees. He did not know how to prune and spray them and his harvest was poor. He also sold the fruits to middle men at throw away prices and the venture was more of a lifestyle than a business.

"I have gained a lot of expertise since I started working with the service providers. I can now effectively take care of my mango trees by pruning and spraying them when the need arises. I have also joined hands with my fellow farmers and we sell our mangoes in our centre. We have set a uniform price to avoid being exploited by the buyers and this has boosted our profits," shares Wambua. Having been assisted to unlock his potential in mango farming, he has planted more trees and turned the activity into a thriving business.

Last season, he made a profit of Kshs. 22,000 from this venture and together with other farmers in the locality, he is working out modalities of exporting mangoes so as to realize better returns.

### The Impact

As a result of this intervention, Makueni Producers Association has been formed. In the 2010 season, the members sold their fruits at specific collection points and consequently, the price of one mango went up from five to eight shillings.

In the same regard, leading farmers in the area have established the Makueni County Fruits Co-operative society which so far has

fifty fully paid members. The membership fee is Kshs. 5,000, with an annual contribution of Kshs. 50. Very soon according to its chairman, Mr. Johnes Waema, this organization will receive a grant of Kshs. 2.6 million from the Ministry of Co-operatives for capacity building. The co-operative has purchased a plot at Emali for putting up a fruits processing plant with the goal of serving both the local and international markets.

Despite these remarkable achievements in a relatively short period of time, the major challenge facing the farmers is how to overcome the vagaries of the local weather which is a major bottleneck to the success of their enterprises.



**HOLDING A FRUIT OF HIS CONTRIBUTION: Alphonse Muriu, senior adviser, economic development, SNV Netherlands.**

By bringing the farmers together, they are now benefiting from economies of scale. They can sell their produce in bulk and hence better prices, while the provision of market linkages among other solutions has now become easier and cheaper. "The next stage should be to consolidate the gains made so far. In this regard, the stakeholders involved in this initiative should continue working together so as to benefit from the synergies of their operations," Mr. Muriu ends with optimism.