

Garlic lifts livelihoods in western Uganda

Kabarole District, in the shadow of the Rwenzori Mountains, is some 300 kilometers west of the Ugandan capital Kampala. Some 70,000 households have depended on small-scale agriculture for a livelihood, but crops like coffee, vanilla, moringa and passion fruit have all been tried without much success. Gilbert Muhanji reports how the introduction of commercial garlic production four years ago is changing fortunes and returning faith in commercial farming to the region's small scale growers.

"Garlic growing has revived our faith in the possibility of a future of affluence," says Mr. Charles Katusabe, chairperson of Mitandi United for Development, a farmer group bringing together 25 members.

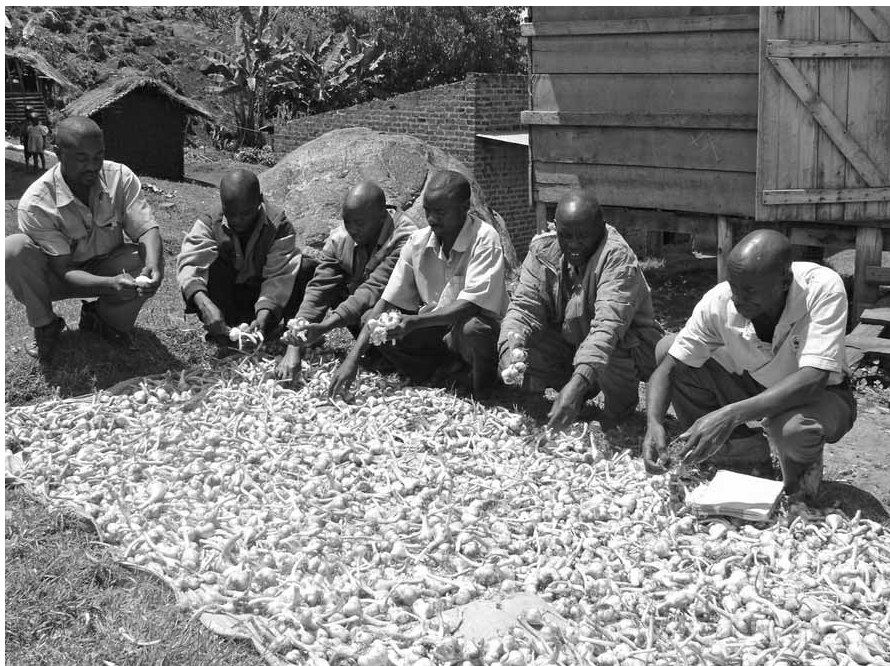
Like many farmers tilling the slopes of Mt. Rwenzori, Charles experimented with different crops after the collapse of the coffee economy at the turn of the millennium. However, vanilla and moringa turned out to be short-lived bubbles that left farmers with unsold stocks when they burst.

In 2005, Charles was one of 800 farmers initially targeted by the Kabarole District Farmers Association's (K DFA) to participate in a commercial garlic production project. With technical and financial support from FARM-Africa's Maendeleo Agricultural Technology Fund (MATF) and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, the project has expanded beyond the original group and today, some 30 farmer groups with a total membership of nearly 900 are engaged in commercial garlic production.

In the first phase from 2005 to 2007, K DFA sought to popularise garlic growing as an alternative income generating crop together with other partners. In the second phase, which commenced in 2008, the scope of the one-year follow on project was narrowed down to three sub-counties - Katebwa, Bukuku and Mugusu which form the KABUMU Cooperative. During this period, the focus was on promotion of commercial garlic seed production, and access to profitable markets.

Adding value

Under KABUMU, K DFA is now promoting value addition and the processing of new garlic products for the market has begun. So far the cooperative has extracted garlic oil which it blends with honey to form a medicinal product



Charles Katusabe (right) with his group members sorting their garlic after harvest

Credit MATF

that has proved effective against common colds and coughs. Other products are garlic powder, garlic bulbs neatly packed in nets and cleaned garlic bulbs preserved in vinegar.

Focusing on knowledge transfer and value addition the project is helping growers adopt new production technologies and pool resources to access profitable markets.

"Our partnership with K DFA has helped a lot in getting us to grow garlic on a commercial scale," says Charles, explaining that while the crop was not new to the area, it had not been considered as a potential money spinner.

He adds: "Working with K DFA has helped us in many ways; we have been able to organise into groups, which has made knowledge transfer easier. We are now moving towards collective marketing which should allow us to earn better prices in the market."

It is through the farmer groups that K DFA has channeled support such as planting material and training. Recently,

the association has helped the groups construct storage cribs that will be used to pool harvests for collective marketing. Through the group, members have learnt that planting in rows and spacing by inches makes weeding the crop easier and improves yields.

Rising livelihoods

Charles earned Ushs 1 million (approx. £300) from his first harvest. He used Ushs 750,000 (£225) to buy one long horned cow while Ushs 250,000 (£75) went to his children's education. He has subsequently increased the acreage under garlic to one and a half acres and from the increased earnings, he recently bought a piece of land for Ushs 1 million (£300) where he is laying the foundation for a better house. He believes that if the market holds, he should be able to expand his garlic business.

"If I continue to enjoy the success I have seen so far, then I should be able to educate my children to university level. In five years time, I should be driving. I

also hope to acquire more land and build a house that will be the envy of the community," he says.

Charles extols the benefits of working in groups. The farmer groups offer a platform for knowledge sharing and a collective approach to community problems. In addition to individual fields, members of the Mitandi United for Development Group have a communal field whose proceeds they use to fund community improvement projects. They also take turns preparing each member's land for planting and, more recently, they have embraced group selling to cut out middlemen who often undercut producers. The group has also set up a tailoring school to help train women in garment making.

Impact

The impact of garlic growing is not difficult to see in Katebwe village. Besides livestock, the village has a number of butcher stalls that point to improved intake of animal protein.

Through simple interventions such as seed multiplication and knowledge transfer that involved indentifying the most suitable variety of garlic for the area and giving farmers such basic skills as line planting, aging technology for seed production, deflowering and crib construction to improve post harvest handling, KDFFA has succeeded in getting growers to adopt the crop. The aging technology is a treatment of garlic seeds with different temperatures and humidity levels to break their dormancy and make them sprout soon after harvest. Traditional seed multiplication methods were slow as they required farmers to skip one planting season to allow germination of the cloves. The project has also enlisted 19 seed multipliers. KDFFA buys the stock from them which it then loans to members.

"In reality garlic is not a new crop to Kabarole; farmers had long been growing it but not on a commercial scale," says KDFFA Coordinator Joseph Baguma. However the first attempts to commercialise the crop in 2002, ran into hurdles. The ideal variety of seed was not available in the right quantities and when KDFFA loaned seed to the initial group of farmers, only 25 percent paid

back their loan.

"There is still a transient conflict between financial pressures to meet present needs and storing seed stock for future planting," says Joseph. "Garlic is a good crop when you look at the gross margins. You get good money but the problem has been the variety and the seed - getting the right quantity of seed of that variety. The practice of keeping seed dormant for a season as you wait for it to bud also creates serious conflict when farmers are getting offers of money," says Kabarole District Production Coordinator Dr. Thomas Nsemerirwe who points to more school going children, iron clad houses and increased land acquisition as some of the benefits enjoyed by project farmers.

Net margins of as much as Ushs 2 million (£595) per acre are possible if all conditions are favourable and two crops per year are possible if one has seed stock. This compares with a paltry Ushs 300,000 (£90) a year if one were to put the same land area under cassava or green bananas (matoke).

The biggest constraints farmers are facing in growing garlic are seed and water. Seed stock costs Ushs 8000 (£2.50) per kilogramme and according to Joseph, planting an acre requires 150 kg. Irrigation is a challenge given the hilly terrain of the project area. These constraints have influenced farm size with many farmers tilling lots that average half an acre in size. But successful farmers are hungry for land and many growers are ploughing back their earnings into increasing their land holdings. Because garlic growing is better suited to the slopes, most are buying land at the bottom of the hills to build houses. The lowlands are also preferred for living quarters because they are nearer water sources.

Farmers' efforts to lock out middlemen and enter into value addition are constrained by lack of capital. Though several growers say middlemen presently play a vital role in taking their crop to the market, they acknowledge that pooling would improve returns.

KDFFA has built cribs where farmers have started storing their produce collectively and has also tried to negotiate for credit from local banks such as

Centenary. The association is also trying to create direct market linkages with big retailers across Uganda but a challenge lies in improving packaging and branding.

"Unless KABUMU has capital to buy garlic from members and process it, value addition is severely constrained as most of the produce would still go to middlemen in raw form", says Joseph. KABUMU has already built a marketing and value addition facility at Mugusu along the Fort Portal- Kasese highway and members believe that with some capital they can move to the next level.

Women

The project has particularly benefitted women. Margaret Kezabu, a mother of four who leads the 17 member Nyabuswa Initiative group, used to grow sweet potatoes and cassava from which she earned about £25 a year. After planting her first seed stock of 100 kg in 2005, she earned Ushs 1 million (£300) from her first harvest of 500 kg of garlic. She spent Ushs 800,000 (£240) to buy a local cow, Ushs 100,000 (£30) she bought a goat while the remainder topped up school dues for her children. From the initial 0.25 acre lot, Margaret has increased the land area under garlic to three acres having paid Ushs 900,000 (£270) for an additional two acres.



Margaret Kezabu standing in her crop field with garlic she has just harvested

Credit MATF

"I did not realise it at the beginning but actually garlic growing has enabled

me to increase the production of other food crops because I now have the money to buy more land and hire labour," Margaret explains.

Margaret's story is replicated in Bukuku where several farmer groups are seeing a more secure livelihood after taking on garlic production. Grace Kaliisa, who started garlic growing three years ago and is the chairperson of the 25 member Kanyamura Women Reflect Circle in Bukuku sub-country, says compared to cassava which has a two year cycle, garlic allows her to get more value from the same land area because two crops are possible in a year.

"Working in a group has also helped us because it gives us better recognition, so we can attract attention and resources more easily. My children are in school and I have taken one to nursing school. I can also afford clothing and food better than before", says Grace.

Like many of her neighbours, the major problem she sees is lack of a reliable marketing system and adequate water. Access to seed stock because of price variability is also a problem for Grace and her group.

"When the market is good, many of our members cannot resist the temptation to sell everything, leaving no seed," she says.



Margaret Kezabu in her group's crib where she has stored her harvested garlic ready for sale
Credit MATF

Future

The KABUMU Cooperative society, which is still recruiting new members, sees a bright future for garlic in Kabarole but only if it can win more influence in the market. To achieve this, it is developing a business plan that involves buying and processing large quantities, and will indicate the profitability of the enterprise. With this plan they hope to convince their local bank to provide a

loan for starting up capital.

"We are still in a chicken and egg situation," says KABUMU chairperson John Basigirenda. "To be effective in the market we need to have the money to buy the crop from farmers otherwise we shall not be able to keep the middlemen out and secure enough stock to support commercial processing." Basigirenda hopes that within the next two years, KABUMU should have been able to buy equipment that can produce certifiable value added products from garlic. His vision is that the cooperative will control 75 percent of the garlic market in Kabarole.

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John Basigirenda (3rd from left), chairperson of KABUMU Cooperative society poses for a photograph with some of his officials in front of their newly built operations office and garlic collection centre.

Credit MATF