Feature: Innovations in agri-business

SYNGENTA FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE: EMPOWERING SMALLHOLDER FARMERS

FOUNDATION SEEKS TO BRING SUBSISTENCE FARMERS TOGETHER AND SUPPORT THEM TO MAKE MAXIMUM USE OF THEIR POTENTIAL, OPPORTUNITIES AND RESOURCES INTO PROFITABLE FARMING

BY WACHERA MAINA

Most small scale farmers in developing countries engage in subsistence farming. Most of them are faced with challenges such as lack of capital and access to ready market as well as post harvest losses that make them shy away from farming.

There is however immense potential and numerous opportunities such as labour, market, land, useful indigenous technologies and farming inputs, within these rural communities, that can be harnessed for the benefit of these farmers.

“We have resources but we do not organize them. We need to make these resources available to the farmers so that they may realize the profitability of their farms,” says George Osure, the program director, Syngenta Foundation for Sustainable Agriculture. “When they organize themselves into groups, accessing resources and inputs becomes more economical. It gives them power to negotiate.”

The Syngenta Foundation is dedicated to making a difference for small scale farmers in developing countries. The foundation set office in Kenya in 2009 and has since then assisted farmers move into profitable farming. The main area of activity is Laikipia East.

“We got interested in farming in arid areas therefore we took up the challenge of adding value to this community through technical innovation,” he explains.

The foundation has come up with various farming tools that have enabled the farmers to exploit the opportunities available. Through intensive training, the farmers have been enlightened on marketing issues, proper input use and various agribusiness processes that they can adopt. They have accessed over 5,000 farmers in the area.

A commercial nursery
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An enterprise
One of Syngenta Foundation's success stories is of a commercial nursery in Laikipia East. According to George, buying roadside seedlings is not advisable. Before Syngenta's intervention, Alice and her husband Wahome just grew and sold seedlings for small amounts of money. Because of lack of knowledge and the assumption that they were smallholders, they overlooked several things that would have transformed their farming into an enterprise.

Through the foundation, they have registered Alime Commercial Nursery as a business, set up an accounting system and registered with relevant bodies that work with farmers such as KEPHIS, HCDA and the Ministry of Agriculture. The commercial nursery upholds the phyto-sanitary-standards that ensure that the seedlings are disease free and of high quality. Today, they grow sweet passion, avocado, pawpaw, mango and calliandra seedlings.

From half an acre, in just ten months, the couple has been able to make gross sales of Kshs. 180,000 from the sale of the seedlings.

Agri-preneurship
Buying a greenhouse is quite expensive for many farmers. Due to different reasons, some cannot access loans from financiers. The story is not different in Laikipia East but through Syngenta and the foundation's innovative technologies, farmers have been able to construct quality timber greenhouses. The 15 by 8 greenhouses are made from locally available timber. The farmer needs to buy the plastic paper for covering the structure and the water systems to be installed.

The farmers have been trained on how to manage the temperature control, air flow and how to maintain proper phyto-sanitary-standards. "They have been able to grow capsicum, cucumber and tomatoes in one greenhouse. Others have even grown snow-peas. We call it the mixed crop green house technology," says George.

Green house farming enables the farmers to grow crops throughout the year and with the correct inputs, the produce fetches a lot of money in the market. According to George, one greenhouse can make up to Kshs. 210,000 in 10 months, meaning that the farmer realizes Kshs. 21,000 per month. "This is the salary of many educated Kenyans today. We tie the farmers' earnings with the reality in the world."

The greenhouse farmers in the area have formed an association which is in the process of registration. Through the association, the farmers will be able to access loans and also address any farming issues that may arise. As a group, they will be able to combine their produce and supply to markets beyond their locality.

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Build brands
Farming is a business that requires a concrete plan and a lot of patience. There is the period when the farmer does not sell anything as the crops are still growing. During this period, they still have expenses to meet and therefore they need money. Through the cash flow management trainings, they are able to meet their needs and improve their lifestyles.

Through the foundation, the farmers are able to get market for their produce. "We are assisting these farmers build their brands. We want to change the system. The market should come to the farmer and not vice versa," avers George. However, he recommends that Kenya should set up market standardization especially when it comes to packaging. "It is happening in South Africa, why not in Kenya? If a sack is supposed to weigh 100 kilogram, then let it be so."

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