

Vision Group, in partnership with dfcu Bank, the Netherlands Embassy in Uganda and KLM Airlines, is searching for Uganda's best farmers. Every Tuesday, we shall profile nominated farmers until December when a panel of judges shall select the best. Sh150m and a trip to the Netherlands await the winners to be announced next month.



By Johnisan Ocakacien

Twenty years ago, seven widows thought of forming a group to empower the rural women both socially and financially through dairy farming. They targeted women widowed and left helpless as a result of the Lord Resistance Army insurgency in Acholi region between 1988 and 2005. They formed an association called Gulu Women Dairy Farmers Association chaired by Margaret Odwar. Over the years, the group has grown and in 2007 was registered as a co-operative.

Humble beginnings

Odwar says members started by forming a small group where they registered with a subscription of sh5,000. In every meeting members were requested to contribute sh1,000 to cater for administration. The group distributed cows among members and setup a milk collection point in Gulu town. The heifers are given as grants to each member upon payment of membership fees and annual subscription. "We started the group, because mothers faced challenges in providing for their families. Milk is the first food to the children, which prompted us to start practising dairy farming for both home consumption and to generate income," Odwar explains.

One year later, after forming the group, the numbers grew to 13. The group then wrote a proposal to Heifer International and through Church of Uganda, got one heifer and training offered by the Gulu district veterinary officer, Dr Tony Alim. The members met twice a week for training.

"On realising that women were taking good care of the cows, the group was given another 13 heifers through Church of Uganda," Odwar adds.

She says with milk being produced by the few members, the group through its partners, was advised to register as a co-operative in order to generate income.

Odwar says as such, Gulu Community Dairy Farmers' Co-operative Society Limited, the business wing of the association registered in 2007. Currently, it has 219 members (196 female and 23 male) all of whom are dairy farmers with over 300 dairy cows.

Dairy practices

Odwar says keeping exotic breeds is not as easy as looking after ordinary cows. Heifers need to be sprayed and given drugs for good quality yields. The co-operative de-worms every three months.

"We also use artificial insemination (AI). The association has employed one extension worker to take care of the cattle," she adds.

Odwar says members used to travel up to Entebbe to buy semen expensively, but since it was introduced at an affordable cost of sh30,000.

Odwar says one of the mistakes they made at first was failure to train members on how to preserve the milk. "We,



Odwar feeding cows from her grazing unit with calliandra leaves. Photos by Johnisan Ocakacien

however trained them and even gave them milk cans for milk storage," she says.

Feeding cattle

"We provide an intensive dairy system which requires an increased level of labour input, due to the need to cut grass daily and provide fodder for the animals," she says. A zero grazing dairy cow needs at least 40kg of feeds per day. She notes that the feed troughs should run along the length of the walking area with a water trough in the middle. The total length of the feed trough should be such that each cow has 75cm-90cm to itself.

"The water troughs should be placed strategically such that both the young and mature cows have access to it," Odwar explains.

The heifers are also fed on pellets which the group makes. "Pellets provide a properly made supplementary ration to meet the energy and protein requirements of the dairy cows that feed on forage as a main diet to support high production levels, improve reproductive performance and household income which minimises feed wastage through reducing spillage while minimising feed wastage by cows," Odwar explains.

The group got a pellet making machine three months ago and it can produce 200 kilograms of pellets in a day. The group sells pellets to members and other farmers at sh1,500 per kg. The machine was a donation from the National Agricultural Research Organisation (NARO),

which is being run by the association and maintained by NARO.

She says before getting the pellets machine, some members of the group made pellets feeds at their homes.

"With the pellets machine, making feeds has been made easy. We sell feeds to the members and other farmers. It is also boosting milk production since members are able to provide quality feeds," Odwar explains.

She adds that the group is making pellets feeds from raw materials, such as cottonseed, potato leaves, maize grain, calliandra leaves and molasses.

Milk production

Odwar says in 2010, the government of the Netherlands donated the association a milk processing unit with a capacity to process 3,000 litres of milk per day.

"We are now processing pasteurised milk, yoghurt, ghee and cream. However, the challenge we are facing is the number of litres we receive daily are not enough. In a day, we get about 800 to 900 litres of milk from members and other community members," Odwar reveals.

GULU WOMEN'S DAIRY SUCCESS

Odwar says members procured a milk processing unit with the capacity to process 3,000 litres of milk per day

Their milk and yoghurt is sold under the Mother's Pride brand.

"The association's main aim is to provide quality milk to the community, however our community still lacks knowledge on how to produce quality milk to suit the market. We are planning to start training dairy farmers how to store milk," Odwar adds.

Benefits to members

Odwar says after the daily collection of members, the money is added up and paid to the members at the end of the month.

She explains that with the money earned from milk, they are able to pay school fees of their children, build transport to the collection point, suffer from malnutrition during the rainy season, however, there are now less cases of such in the region since women are able to feed their families with milk, which provides essential nutrients for growth.

"Engaging in dairy farming is helping members to make biogas, which is used for cooking and to reserve the environment," Odwar explains.

She further explains that, the association holds training sessions every Tuesday where members gather at their site in Bardege division and to learn modern farming.



Members making milk pellets.

Community/ social Impact Potential members are trained at no cost. Later, one is registered as a full member after paying sh5,000 membership fee. "With the simple system of registration, we have encouraged many members of the public to join us," Odwar says. She adds that the association has started buying milk from non members creating a market link to them. "Because we have the ability to store and add value to the milk, this is certain to stabilise prices in the area," Odwar says.

Challenges

Odwar says the biggest challenge is poor feeding of the animals, which results in low milk yields.

"Our cows can on average produce 20 litres of milk per day. However, some produce less milk because of poor feeding," she says. To reduce this, members have been encouraged to plant grass for the animals and use pellets.

"The cost of maize bran, rice bran, sunflower cake, cottonseed cake and soy remains high and they are not readily available on the market for small scale farmers making animal feeds.

She says livestock diseases and vectors, such as flies remains a big threat to the dairy cattle.

She adds that it is important to provide cleaning materials, such as brushes at every foothold and to ensure that they are not shared between separate footholds to prevent outbreak of diseases.

Conserving environment

Planting trees, both for fodder and shade for the animals is one of the tasks undertaken by members.

Odwar explains that fodder trees, such as calliandra, are both for animals feeds and members are fighting climate change through planting more trees with seedlings supplied by National Agricultural Research institute Organisation.

Odwar says members have started using biogas for cooking and this has reduced usage of firewood, hence saving the environment.

WHAT OTHERS SAY

Denis Kinyera
Dairy cattle keeping has helped many widows pay school fees and others have built houses. The women need to continue elevating themselves from poverty because in Acholi sub-region there are few people keeping dairy cattle for milk production.

Francesca Amony
The women were vulnerable, but what they have done has transformed many lives even outside Acholi sub-region.

Vincent Olango
I encourage the women to further improve the project so that many more people benefit.

Alice Anena
Members are getting income to sustain their families from the sale of milk. I urge them to continue with the great job. The women should also engage in growing crops besides dairy farming.

HARVESTING
Sales and marketing

Out of the 900 litres from members, a litre of raw milk goes for sh1,800 and at the end of the day, association gets a gross of sh1.6m from milk sales, or sh48.6m per month.

Odwar says the association buys milk from its members at sh1,100. The sh700 is the contribution from members to run the association. The association has bought land in Bardege division in Gulu municipality, on which a milk processing factory was built.

Odwar says the association sells its products to hotels and shops in Gulu, South Sudan and institutions, such as schools, hospitals, The AIDS Support Organisation and community members.

"She said the demand for milk in the region has gone high."



Odwar inspecting the milk plant with NARO official in Gulu.

Testimonies

"My problems have been solved since I cater for my family with ease. I used to have challenges of providing for my family because I did not have money. However, with the dairy cows now, my family is healthy." Jessica Otto, one of the beneficiaries, says.

John Okot, a resident of Koch Dingako in Oryonia Peya, Gulu district, says being part of the group has helped him get daily income from the milk and this has improved his livelihood in the village as he is able to take his children to school.

"Life was difficult, but when I got the dairy cows, my life changed since I take milk everyday. I started with one cow and now I have four," Okot says.

Loda Appla, 64, and resident of Aywe, Layibi division in Gulu municipality, says keeping a heifer for milk has helped her raise her grandchildren who are orphans and also top up their school fees with earnings from the group every month. Loda says she has acquired land with money from the group.

"My life was at risk, but when I had about Gulu Women Dairy Farmer Association, I joined and my life improved," she adds.

She says selling milk has helped her save money and no longer asks for financial assistance.

Robert Ojok, a resident of Oryonia, Oryonia village Omoro county, Gulu district, says he gets 30 litres of milk every day and sells it to the group. He gets paid at the end of the month.

"I earn good money at the end of the month and I use it to look after my family. I have also built a house from my earnings," says.

Value addition
Odwar says the association has started processing pasteurised milk, yoghurt, ghee and cream which has increased the market opportunity of milk productivity in the district.

"We have started selling packed milk. Our product has a lifespan of two weeks. However, we are looking at acquiring the capacity to carry out ultra high temperature processing (UHT), which enables milk to stay for much longer," Odwar says.

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Three things to learn from the association

- 1 Be willing to learn: Most of the members had to go through dairy farming training.
- 2 Aim for betterment: Even though the women had suffered loss, they did not give up, but thought of ways to look after their families through the association.
- 3 Try something new: The Gulu women did not stop at getting milk, they went ahead to manufacture yogurt.