



Post harvest handling is one of the challenges the farmer is facing and this has affected the price of their produce, (below) is his cassava garden. PHOTOS BY SARAH TUMWEBAZE

Jimmy Okiror's journey to commercial farming in Abim

CAPTIVATING. Jimmy Okiror, a Senior Four dropout has found a goldmine in farming, writes Sarah Tumwebaze

After completing his ordinary level studies at St Francis Achumat in Amuria District in 2000, Jimmy Okiror tried to find avenues through which he could raise money to continue with his studies; but failed.

With nothing left to do in Amuria, he decided to go back to his home town in Adea Parish, Molerum Sub County, Abim District.

After settling in Abim and living in poverty for three years, the 40-year-old realized that he could get a livelihood from farming.

Acquiring land and going commercial

"I decided to become a subsistence farmer in 2003. Initially, I only had three acres of land but after living in Abim for 13 years, I was able to acquire 35 acres," he explains adding that, "I applied for the land through the Adea Parish. After showing my interest, the leaders at the parish cross checked with the district on the ownership of the land and there was no specific owner. They registered me as the owner and all I paid for was the surveyor's services."

The father of six explains that after getting full ownership of that land, he resolved to become a subsistence farmer since he did not have capital and the information to start commercial farming. However, towards the end of 2015, he got a good cassava harvest and decided to sell



TIP

•Book keeping is very important because it enables you to know the profits and losses you will have made in a season. This in the long run allows you to plan appropriately.

some of it. "I got profits of Shs2.5m. It was from this money that I bought seeds for other crops such as millet, cassava, maize, sorghum and green grams among other crops. I planted these in the first rainy season of 2016. After selling them, I got more profits and expanded my garden. I now have gardens of different crops on 30 acres."

Rudimentary farming methods

Okiror says initially, he was using the hand hoe for farming. "When I first started farming, the only

farming method I could afford was the hand hoe. I would get help from my relatives and we cultivated part of land using hoes."

He says the process was hectic and it took them close to one month to cultivate the whole area.

"This delayed the planting season. I even lost hope in farming because after harvesting, I compared the efforts we had put in and the results but it was not worth it."

However, he was

Shs2.5m

PROFIT OKIROR GOT FROM THE FIRST HARVEST

encouraged by other farmers. "After talking to other farmers, they told me that if I use ploughing oxen, I will reduce on the number of days I take while cultivating my garden. So I bought the first pair of oxen at Shs1.6m. But when I realized that it was not enough, I decided to buy another pair."

He says that with the four oxen, he noticed a difference because they could cultivate an acre in less than four hours but this was still insufficient so he decided to hire from other farmers.

"Hiring a pair is Shs25, 000 per acre. So at times I have six ploughing oxen and these cultivate over three acres in a day," he explains adding that besides using the oxen, he also employs between three to 12 casual labourer per day depending on the season."

Okiror says these labourers normally work from 7am to 12pm and he pays them Shs3, 000 per day. "If they are hardworking, they will cultivate between one to two acres a day. However, if they are lazy, they can even fail to cover an acre and because you agree on the terms of payment before they start working, you end up operating in losses."

Success

He explains that from the time he started doing commercial farming, his livelihood has improved and he can ably provide for his family.

"In a good season, like the one we had at the beginning of 2016, I got profits of Shs7m and managed to...

LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL

Despite facing challenges, Okiror is hopeful that with the knowledge he has gained, he will get more profits that will allow him build a permanent house before the end of this year.

He explains that at the beginning of this year, he became a member of the Special Programme Convening and Convincing (SPCC) by Share An Opportunity Uganda (SAO U) in partnership with the Inter Church Cooperation Organisation (ICCO).

Okiror says under this programme, "They have trained us in different farming methods. They even told us about the availability of a tractor at the district offices which we can hire at Shs70, 000. We have been taught about the importance of good post-harvest handling and the need to work in groups so that we can sell our produce at the right market prices among other skills."

He adds that through the programme, they have also been able to visit other farmers who have shared knowledge on what they do and how they have managed to overcome some of the challenges they face.

"We have now formed farmer groups and through these, we are connected to profitable markets for our produce. I am hopeful that when I finally sell my produce at the end of this season, I will get more profits," he says while looking at his millet plantation which is ready for harvesting

my children to some of the good schools around."

Challenges

However, these achievements have come with a number of challenges. He explains, "The rudimentary methods of farming are one of our greatest challenges. We heavily rely on hand hoe farming so this makes the process hard and very long."

The farmer explains that they also lack access to chemicals such as pesticides for their produce and seeds for planting. The unstable weather condition is also another challenge to them.

Okiror further notes that he has a challenge of limited access to storage facilities.

"We have no storage facility in Adea Parish; this makes it hard for us to store our produce until the market prices are good so we end up selling at low prices thus making losses."

Additionally, profits from farming have been affected by middlemen who buy farmers' produce while it is still in the garden.

"This has greatly affected the amount of money we get from each garden. In some cases, it leaves some families with no food because after you have sold everything in the garden, you cannot access it for food."

Okiror explains that this was one of the reasons many farmers did not have food during the dry spell.