

# Dairy Farming transforming farmers' lives in western Uganda

BY FELIX AINEBYOONA

**MBARARA.** Dairy farming in western region has been carried out on the traditional model based on social prestige that prizes quantity over quality.

In many farming communities, one was considered successful basing on the big number of cattle he had than what he gained from them. In fact, most indigenous dairy farmers in the region had not considered keeping cattle as a business, hence continued to have poor quality animals.

To change this mindset, SNV, a Netherlands development organisation in partnership with the Embassy of Netherlands, launched the Inclusive Dairy Enterprise (TIDE) project to increase farm productivity and reduce poverty for 20,000 farmers in Bushenyi, Ntungamo, Mbarara, Kiruhura, Isingiro and Sheema districts.

The TIDE project focused on small and medium-sized dairy farms to ensure that women and youth become active participants in the value chain. The project had the following objectives: improving dairy farm productivity, improving commercial milk quality, supporting proactive dairy sector regulation and improving household nutrition.

Under the objective of improving dairy farm productivity,

TIDE sought to transform four well-managed farms into dairy training farms where an estimated 5,000 small and large-scale farmers will benefit from practical training on five thematic areas: dairy breeding, fodder, feeds and nutrition, disease prevention and control, clean milk production, handling, storage and transportation, and zero grazing.

SNV also sought to boost the quality of commercial milk through quality-based payment systems and rolling out an independent milk inspection and enforcement system.

Under the objective of improving commercial milk quality, partnerships between farmers, milk traders and processors would be promoted so as to boost the quality of commercial milk. Quality-based payment systems would be used as incentives for farmers and traders to supply high-quality milk. The project also sought to motivate traders to sell safe, unpackaged milk to urban consumers by introducing 'milk ATMs' as bulk selling points for pasteurised milk. This would address the government's concern that unsafe milk is being sold in urban areas.

The TIDE project, which started in 2015, is already reaping dividends for many farmers. SNV worked with the Dairy Development Authority (DDA) to roll-out an independent milk inspection and enforcement system that would accompany the introduction of new milk quality systems which has strengthened competitiveness of the formal dairy sector and supported sector transformation and market investment opportunities. DDA's mandate involves registering dairy farmers' groups; supporting farmer's marketing organizations and dairy development activities such as extension, breeding research, training, products development and general market promotion.

Rwempogo Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society Limited in Nyakahita Parish, Nyakashashara Sub-county, Kiruhura District, was one of the cooperatives identified for capacity building support so as to improve their productivity and milk quality.

"SNV organized us in a group of four cooperatives called Lyantonde Cluster which had Nyakahita, Kyenshama, Kabula and Rwempogo dairy cooperative societies. The purpose of the cluster was to help members receive joint training, share experiences and join efforts to form better initiatives," says Yosam Mpora Rutembesa, the chairperson of Rwempogo Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society Limited. With his team members, the cluster organized exchange visits with other cooperatives where they identified problem areas which, when improved, would improve service delivery to farmers. These included water harvesting, pasture improvement; paddocking, yoghurt making and starting



The 3,000-litre cooler SNV helped Rwempogo Dairy Cooperation to acquire on loan. PHOTO BY FELIX AINEBYOONA

drug shop, which has transformed the lives of dairy farmers in the area.

When SNV came to our area about two years ago, they started training our cooperative society members to start looking at dairy farming as a business they taught us on how to feed a cow to give more milk through paddocking and on how to store the pastures on which to feed the cows in the dry season. They also encouraged us to rear a smaller number of cows so as to maximize care and increase production. Our farmers were also trained on modern paddocking methods, pasture management and building milking parlours for hygienic and efficient milk production.

It's evident that the training given has tremendously improved productivity as narrated by the chairman.

Ronald Rubongoya Mugisha, a resident of Rurambira Parish, Nyakashashara Sub-county in Kiruhura District, attests to this change. He has increased his milk yield from 20 litres per day from 20 cows to 100 litres per day from 30 cows and this is in the dry season. He contributes the change to the training he got from SNV and Agriterra on modern paddocking methods that has helped him manage his pastures.

"I expect my milk yield to increase even more now that I am putting into practice what they taught us. SNV contributed 50% towards the paddocking of my land. My mindset has also changed. I have learnt to treat my dairy farming as a business with the potential to give me income," Mugisha adds.

Rwempogo Dairy Farmers Cooperative Society Limited secured a loan with support from SNV and bought a milk cooler of 3000 litres for milk marketing. This quickly improved the quality of milk. Prices went up and we were able to attract more suppliers and increase our milk volumes which has brought us even better buyers. The cooperative adheres to the minimum quality standards specified by government and buyers,

and has employed a team of highly qualified quality controllers. For every litre of milk supplied, the cooperative saves 1% as contribution for operations and savings for the cooperative. The leadership at the cooperative has been coached on good financial management practices with experts from SNV. Since the volume of milk has increased, the cooperative earns money for investment. "We expanded our business enterprise by siting another cooler in Kashenshero. We have now, bought three plots of land in Rwempogo Trading Centre where we are planning to construct offices" says Yosam Rutembesa.

Before the training from SNV, dairy farmers faced many challenges ranging from insufficient pastures, water, pests and diseases which forced farmers to sell their cows as low as Shs800,000 - 1million UGX when the same cows go for between 1.5million UGX - 2million UGX. With more information and training on farming as a business, farmers have learnt to feed their cows and stopped the practice of selling them below market rates.

As an adaptation measure to climate change, SNV and Balton Uganda are working with the farmers to manage the unpredictable weather patterns by ensuring that farmers have sustainable source of water for their cattle during the dry season. TIDE is also supporting the growing of drought resistant forages that are later stored as hay and silage for use in the dry season. In collaboration with Biogas Solutions Uganda (BSU), the project is encouraging the use of biogas as a source of energy to contribute to climate change mitigation measures.

Through the governance trainings, the cooperative has constituted a board of directors with functional committees which are also being trained on their roles for better performance. The board has also been trained on succession planning to ensure continuity when the old board's term expires. This has helped streamline roles and functions of the cooperative board members and management.



My Yosam Mpora Rutembesa preparing hay after being trained by SNV at his home in Kiruhura District. PHOTO BY FELIX AINEBYOONA

Agriterra business advisor Emile Agaba praises the work of Rwempogo Dairy Farmers Cooperative.

"We started with Rwempogo DFCS at the start of 2016 and found out that the cooperative had capacity, ambition and willingness to move to the next level. They yearned for knowledge and we obtained a better understanding of them after reviewing their documents (constitution, financial statements, audit reports, etc.) and by assessing its governance, membership, organisation structure, HRM policy, financial management and service delivery to members. We also conducted an appraisal of their current performance in terms of production, bulking, processing and marketing in order and identified bottlenecks and proposed improvements. We explored their business cases as well as the context of their business value chain. We partnered with SNV to develop the cooperative's capacity so that it can offer good services to its members and so that the members are able to take up several TIDE products."

It became clear to them that the business starts at the farm and the cooperative becomes an extension. They have improved their governance systems by developing management policies and systems. They are now able to prepare good budgets and are implementing them, make proper cash flow forecasts and that is why they are becoming a Centre of excellence for other cooperatives to learn from," Mr Emile notes.

Mr Steven Aikiriza, the SNV dairy advisor, says there is potential for commercialization of the dairy enterprise in southwestern Uganda due to the presence of huge investments by processing companies in the region such as Pearl Dairy farms, GBK dairy Products, Lakeside dairy, Birunga dairies and Amos dairies. In this environment therefore, SNV smart interventions become handy and important in improved dairy farming practices, increased milk production and productivity, improved commercial milk quality, improved regulation and facilitation of investments.

He says after opening up the practical dairy training farms and training a few farmers on improved dairy farming practices and practical skills in farming as a business farmers have changed their perceptions of looking after the milking herd and calves and have re-committed to lay up better infrastructure, calf pens, plant quality fodder, re-investing in water harvesting and are now asking "where do we get the best performing heifers in the region"? A good pregnant dairy heifer ready to give birth in another 4-5 months' time is being marketed at 5M. This is an investment that will take farming a level higher.

The dairy landscape for farmers in western Uganda is promising and wise farmers are taking advantage of the opportunities SNV and its partners are providing to them.