SEEDS PROJECT RESTORES FARMERS' DIGNITY

By Umar Nsubuga

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Farmers under their association, the PUR BER Youth Group in Omoro district attending training

Sam Obura walks confidently through his soy-bean field in Acet central village, Omoro district, something unimaginable a few years ago. The once-frustrated young farmer, who had nearly abandoned agriculture after repeated losses, now counts his harvest in tonnes and his earnings in millions.

"There was a time I thought farming was a punishment," Obura says, examining the healthy green pods stretching across his acreage. "We planted without guidance, harvested little and sold at throwaway prices. Today, I pay school fees on time, have built a permanent house and employ other youth during peak seasons. Farming has given me back my dignity."

Obura's transformation is part of a wider story unfolding across northern Uganda, driven by the National Oilseeds Project under the agriculture ministry. Through technical training, improved seeds and structured market linkages, the project is restoring hope and positioning oilseed farming as an engine of rural economic mobility.

At the centre of this transformation in the Acholi sub-region is the PUR BER Youth Farmer Group of Omoro district.

A DREAM BORN UNDER MANGO TREES

In 2015, 30 young men and women, who had dropped out of school due to a lack of school fees, gathered under mango trees in Acet central village. They shared a simple ambition: to escape poverty through agriculture.

They named their association the PUR BER Youth Group, a declaration of identity and resilience. Leadership positions were debated and land contributions negotiated.

"We argued over strategies, but never over our dreams. We wanted to prove that youth are not lazy; we just need opportunity and guidance," recalls Jimmy Latigo, the group's spokesperson. Most members had access to about five acres of family land. However, traditional farming methods, poor seed quality, unreliable rainfall and exploitative middlemen meant their harvests barely sustained their households.

THE TURNING POINT

The breakthrough came in 2023 when the National Oilseeds Project expanded its interventions to Omoro district. Alex Mukuluma, the project's monitoring and evaluation officer, says the approach was deliberate.

"When we entered Omoro, we first listened. Many communities were rebuilding after years of instability. In addition to seeds, farmers needed systems, confidence and market assurance," Mukuluma explains.

The group received foundation soybean seed (Maksoy 3N) and hybrid sunflower varieties. Members were trained in good agronomic practices and climate-smart agriculture, including line planting, correct spacing, timely weeding, soil fertility management and post-harvest handling.

Soon after [illegible] to see agriculture as an enterprise," Mukuluma says.

SEEDS OF CHANGE

Demonstration plots showed what was possible with proper spacing and agronomic practices. Members who once broadcast seed randomly began planting it in straight lines, improving efficiency and yields.

"I had farmed all my life, but never seen such organised methods. Now I produce enough to feed my grandchildren and support their education," Rose Latigo, an 80-year-old farmer associated with the group, says.

Season A of 2024 became a defining moment. The group sold 46,108 kilogrammes of soybeans, earning sh129,350,500. Instead of selling individually to middlemen, they negotiated collectively, strengthening their bargaining power. "For the first time, buyers came looking for us," Jimmy Latigo says.

Christopher Gumisiriza, the project's manager, describes it as a structural transformation.

Despite challenges, such as climate variability, limited mechanisation and fluctuating market prices, collective marketing and better information have improved resilience.

"When empowered farmers succeed and communities prosper. The transformation in Omoro is not accidental. It is the result of c ordinated investment, accountability, and partnership," he says.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

The success of the PUR BER Youth Farmer Group has led to increased business activity during harvest seasons. Casual labour opportunities have expanded for landless youth. Household nutrition has improved as farmers integrate oil seeds into crop rotation systems, enhancing soil fertility and supporting diversified production. Permanent houses are rising where grass-thatched huts once stood. Parents now send children to secondary school and vocational institutes. "Before this project, many youths were idle; now they see farming as respectable," Benon Obenyi, a group member, says.