GOVERNMENT-BACKED CO-OPERATIVES TRANSFORMING RURAL LIVELIHOODS

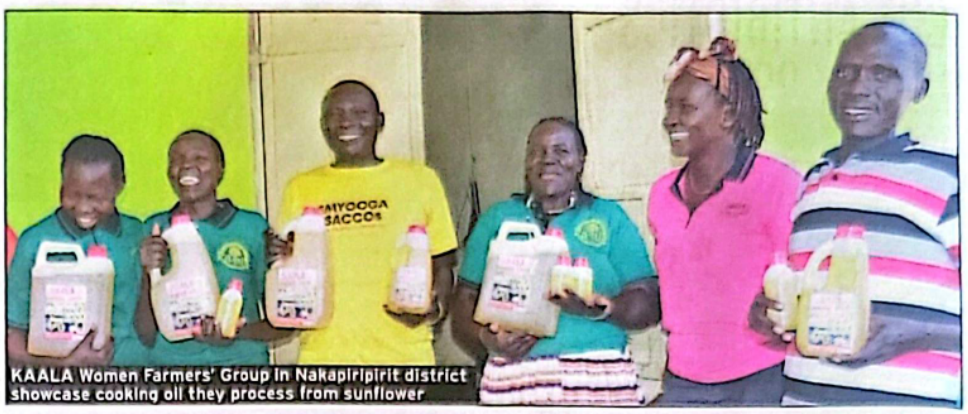
For many rural households, agriculture is no longer mere survival. It is rapidly becoming a sustainable pathway to steady income, improved living standards and long-term thrivance for families and communities, writes **Umar Nsubuga**

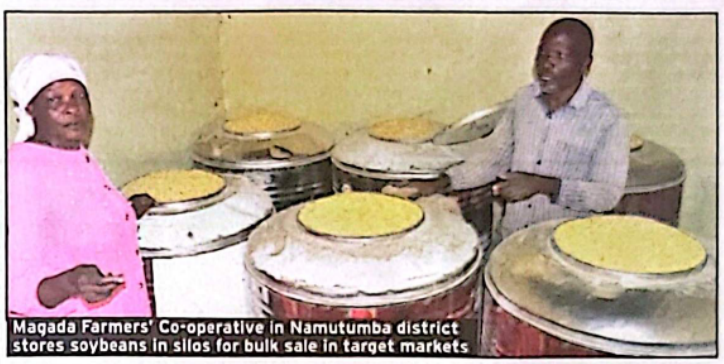
A new wave of change is quietly reshaping Uganda's rural communities as farmers embrace co-operation as a pathway to progress. Across regions, such as Karamoja, Teso, Sebei, Lango and Busoga, smallholder farmers are steadily moving away from working in isolation towards organised, market-oriented production.

Through co-operatives, farmers are gaining practical skills, building confidence and strengthening their bargaining power in the marketplace.

They are learning to plan, produce quality and sell collectively.

OPERATIONS IN 81 DISTRICTS PROVE HOW CO-ORDINATED INVESTMENT, TRAINING AND MARKETING CAN BETTER LIVES.


KAALA Women Farmers' Group in Nakapiripirit district showcase cooking oil they process from sunflower


Magada Farmers' Co-operative in Namutumba district stores soybeans in silos for bulk sale in target markets

STRUCTURED FARMING

In Bukedea district, John Ojakol, the chairperson of Kamutur Oilseed Farmers' Co-operative Society Limited, remembers when farming was a struggle with little reward. Farmers relied on rudimentary tools, poor-quality seeds and unpredictable markets.

"We were working hard, but the returns were small; each farmer was on their own and buyers dictated the prices. Forming a co-operative changed everything," Oonyu explains.

Today, Kamutur Co-operative has grown into a strong institution with hundreds of members, including women and youth. With training and support from National Oil Seeds Project (NOSP) a project under the Ministry of Agriculture Animal Industry and Fisheries (MAAIF), farmers now plant improved seed varieties, keep proper records and sell collectively.

RESILIENT FARMERS

For Phoebe Ageo, a 45-year-old resident of Adamasiko village in Soroti district, farming used to be a gamble.

"I would plant my soybeans, but pests, poor seeds and unpredictable rains often destroyed the crop. I did not know how to link my produce to a reliable market," she recalls.

Today, Ageo's story has changed, thanks to a life-altering partnership between the Soroti Catholic Diocese (SOCAIDIDO) and NOSP. Through this initiative, smallholder farmers are being trained in modern production practices, climate-smart farming and post-harvest management, while also gaining access to certified seeds and guaranteed markets. Across Uganda, NOSP's approach goes beyond distributing inputs. Through structured training in agronomy, post-harvest handling and business management, farmers are learning to increase productivity and reduce losses.

Christopher Gumisiriza, the project manager of NOSP, explains the vision behind the initiative.

"We are building strong institutions, production alone is not enough. Farmers must be organised, meet quality standards and connect to reliable markets," he says.

This approach reflects a key government priority, transforming agriculture into a commercial sector that can drive economic growth.

COLLECTIVE MARKETING

The Rev. Fr Michael Omaria, the director of the Soroti Catholic Diocese development arm, says organisation is the key.

"When farmers come together, they gain bargaining power, they are no longer exploited by middlemen," he explains.

Dickens Ekwang, a member of Okutuagwe-Ololango Co-operative Society Limited in Chegere village, Apac district, says unity has transformed their fortunes. He notes that selling as individuals made them vulnerable, but once the co-operative was strengthened through NOSP, members were able to bulk sunflower and soybeans to negotiate better prices through structured markets resulting in higher incomes and greater confidence among farmers.

INCLUSIVE APPROACHES

Government interventions under NOSP have prioritised inclusion, ensuring that women and youth actively participate in agricultural development. In Nakapiripirit district, the KAALA Women Farmers' Group stands as a powerful example. What began as a small initiative driven by curiosity has grown into a thriving sunflower processing enterprise.

Racheal Akol, one of the pioneers, recalls how her journey began. "I used to wonder where cooking oil came from. When I discovered it could be made from crops we grow, I started experimenting," she says. With support from NOSP and partners, the group acquired a processing machine, enabling them to produce cooking oil within their community.

"We package oil in small and large quantities to suit different buyers. This has helped us reach more people and increase sales," Sarafina Koote, the group's marketing manager, explains. Today, the co-operative provides income, employment and a sense of purpose for its largely female members.

FINANCIAL GROWTH

In Kole district, Ambrose Ogang, the chairperson of Te-opok, a community co-operative, explains how savings have strengthened farmers' capacity.

"We started with small contributions, now we have built strong financial systems that support farming," he says.

Farmers can borrow money to buy inputs, hire labour and expand production, repaying after harvest. This has reduced dependence on expensive loans and enabled farmers to invest with confidence.

"There was a time we struggled to feed our families, now we can pay school fees, improve our homes and plan for the future", recalls Alice Adong, a farmer in the area.

Youth are also benefiting. Joy Atoo, a student, says savings from farming have helped her continue her education.

"I saved money from my harvest and paid my school fees," she explains.

VISIBLE IMPACT

The benefits of co-operatives are visible across rural areas. Farmers are building permanent houses, educating their children, and investing in additional businesses.

Communities are also experiencing broader economic growth. Increased agricultural activity has created jobs, improved local markets and strengthened social cohesion.

Despite the progress, challenges remain. Climate change, fluctuating market prices and limited access to mechanisation continue to affect farmers.

However, by working together via cooperatives, farmers can share risks, access information, and quickly adapt to changing conditions.

VALUE ADDITION

A key achievement of government support has been promoting value addition, allowing farmers to earn more from their produce. In Sebei sub-region, Jackson Kiptala has moved from selling raw sunflower seeds to processing cooking oil.

"When I was selling to middlemen, I earned little. Now I process and sell oil and my income has improved", he says.

Similarly, co-operatives across the country are exploring processing, storage and packaging to increase value and reduce post-harvest losses. This aligns with national goals of agro-industrialisation and import substitution, particularly in reducing reliance on imported cooking oil.

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