

## Sipili is ready for business

**Mr George Kamau has succeeded in setting up a small business in Sipili, a remote village in Kenya. Noting the need for farmers to buy and sell their produce locally, he opened a small premises where he also sells organic farm inputs and other goods. He has also been working with the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN), which has opened an information centre in Sipili. Together, these efforts have benefited the community in general: they can buy and sell basic goods locally and are better informed of prices and marketing opportunities further afield.**

Josphat Wachira

Mr George Kamau is a farmer living in Sipili, in the Rift Valley province, Kenya. As this is a semi-arid area, where rain comes rarely, he plants short-duration maize, which takes between three and six months to grow. He is one of the villagers who farms quite successfully. However, to try to sell his produce and do some shopping for his family, he needed to go to the town of Nyahururu, about 60 km away from Sipili. To overcome this hindrance, Mr Kamau, together with his wife, started trying to sell some of their farm produce to the local people. At first it was difficult, but later they started doing some business, and opened a small premises. Mr Kamau is also a project officer with the Tree is Life Trust, and is trained in organic farming, which is widely practised in this area. Through this, he realised that there was a market for organic farming inputs, and he came up with the idea of selling organic fertilizers and similar products locally.



**When farmers are able to sell their produce locally, they don't have to go to great lengths to reach their buyers.**

During the months of April and September, when everyone is working on their farm, business is slow. He and his family also concentrate on their farm. After this period and with the harvest

at hand, Mr Kamau is ready to go back to his trading business. As he used the income of his business to invest in the farm, he sells the farm produce so he can add other stock to the business, ready for the festive season. And since organic farming inputs are not sold throughout the year, Mr Kamau has set aside a space in his business premises for selling other goods which will help supplement his income, such as cooking pots, stoves, and basic domestic supplies.

At first, selling their farming produce was a big issue for the farmers of Sipili. As they were not able to take their produce to the market, businessmen or middlemen would come and buy their produce. This meant the farmers would have to accept the low prices offered, and make a loss. One effort to combat this was made with the support of the Catholic church. The farmers built food reserves, where they stored cereals during the high season and sold them during the low season. This helped the farmers of Sipili to earn a living and make some profits. Recently, business in Sipili has been on the increase. Various farmers' efforts were noticed by the Arid Lands Information Network (ALIN), a national NGO promoting exchange of information on sustainable development. Mr Kamau helped to start a local group of ALIN in Sipili. This local group supported them in opening an information centre, including a telecentre, to help the farmers market their farm produce through mobile phones. The centre is open to everyone and is free. Internet services and e-mail are available. The centre also helps farmers sell their products. They do this by giving them the prices of goods in the markets even far way from Sipili. This means they have the information needed to avoid the brokers and middlemen who, in the past, took advantage of the farmers' lack of access to markets and information. This has helped to increase trading, business and farming in Sipili.

Today Mr Kamau is a happy farmer and businessman. He now has a staff of three workers. With the help of his wife, the yearly pattern is that when the planting season is approaching, he sells short duration seeds and organic fertilizers. When planting starts, he closes the business and attends to his farm. He then only opens the shop in the evenings and weekends, until the harvests. After the harvest, when there is no work on the farm, he opens the business daily. From September to March, due to increased trading opportunities, most people in Sipili have some money for their own well-being, and also for preparing for the next planting season.

A major factor contributing to Mr Kamau's success with his small business was that he was creative and noticed that there was a market for organic farm inputs in Sipili. His achievement was to be the first to introduce these inputs and other products cheap enough for farmers to buy. By increasing the range of goods bought and sold, his efforts have also benefited the community, as people no longer need to travel far (costing time and money) to buy their necessities.

**Josphat Wachira.** Tree is Life Trust, Catholic Diocese of Nyahururu, P.O. Box 1206, 20300, Nyahururu, Kenya. E-mail: kairungi2009@yahoo.com

ALIN has recently joined the LEISA Network. See the editorial on p. 4.